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OR, The Grip-sack Sharp's Clean Sweep.

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WEST NICK," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE
KING," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WAKING UP THE TOWN.

"MURDER! Help! Choke him off!" Full of abject terror, those words rang out through the streets of Capital City one pleasant Sabbath morning in midsummer, and if aught was needed to complete that alarm, it was supplied by the vicious explosion of a revolver.

"Don't murder— Ow-wow!"

A second report cut the piteous appeal short, and a number of citizens rushed toward the spot just in time to see the final act of what was almost assuredly a tragedy.

One man fleeing for dear life from another; hatless, disordered in garb, with arms wildly swinging one second, to rise shiveringly above his head the next instant, as he plunged headlong to the earth.

A second man in hot pursuit, briefly pausing

in that swift chase to render his pitiless aim the more certain.

As the cloud of smoke hung before his face on the still air, the armed man ducked and bent to one side, the better to note the result of his shot, then springing forward, uttered a merciless laugh as he beheld his victim quivering on the ground.

"Another notch to help fill the 'death-stick!'" he cried, brandishing his still smoking revolver. "One more— Ha!" with a snarling cry. "Only scotched—not dead yet!"

His victim made a feeble effort to regain his footing, but fell forward upon his face, and those of the startled citizens who were nearest the scene, caught a pitiful appeal for mercy:

"Pity—don't shoot—I'm dying!"

"Ay! pity such as you showed unto me when you turned to ridicule the grandest, noblest, most beneficent invention which marks the Nineteenth Century as— Die, you vile blasphemer! Die! Die as many times as a cat has lives!"

And, standing almost across that feebly struggling shape, the armed avenger leveled his weapon and deliberately fired shot after shot at his helpless victim.

Used though the majority of lookers-on were to wild and tragic scenes, this cold brutality was a little too much for calm endurance, and weapons began to appear as their owners gave vent to cries of stern warning.

"Give him a show!"

"He's a white man—not a dog!"

"Let up—or go down yourself, stranger!"

"Bring a rope!"

"Run 'im up a tree, the bloody 'sassin!"

The fugitive lay still, lying on the broad of his back with arms flung outward and hands tightly clinched, his face smeared with blood, his lower jaw fallen until his strong white teeth were visible below his closely-trimmed mustaches.

The avenger stood with one foot lightly resting upon that broad chest, only then seeming to realize that other beings inhabited that quarter of the globe. He must have seen that danger threatened him, yet he showed no signs of quailing. Indeed, as he confronted that excited crowd, now rapidly increasing as more distant citizens hurried toward the spot, he seemed the least concerned of them all.

His revolver must be empty, since they had counted six shots, yet he made no effort to eject the shells and replace them with fresh cartridges. This, added to the undeniable fact that he looked little like a reckless desperado such as his recent actions would indicate, caused the citizens to hesitate, where show of angry defiance or an attempt at flight would have hurled them as a single man upon the ruthless slayer.

"Who is it? What'd he do to deserve butcherin' like that?" asked one of the foremost, thumb on hammer as he nervously fingered his revolver.

"What did he do?" came the indignant echo, as the slayer flung out his unarmed hand, his strong countenance fairly aglow with just resentment. "Enough to merit ten thousand deaths all combined in one! What did— Just think of it, men of Capital City!" his clear notes ringing out as only those of a practiced speaker to out-door audiences can do.

"The conscienceless miscreant called me and my grip-sack a traveling fraud! Ay! he even went so far as to say that the matchless and unequaled article which I am about to introduce to your notice is— I can't say it, gentlemen—I really *cannot* utter the shameful insults which dropped from his vile lips before I sealed them in death!"

The clear voice grew lower, with a husky cadence. And the back of a hand was brushed swiftly across his eyes.

The action was naturally performed, yet, somehow, it gave an impression of insincerity. If any emotion was distinguishable in that face or those keen, gray-blue eyes, it was more closely akin to avarice than to remorse or indignation.

Those closest to the spot interchanged quick glances, seeking from others the solution which baffled their own judgment, but the being who was thus puzzling them gave no token of sharing their uneasiness.

In figure he was little different from the average, being neither very tall nor very short, neither very heavy nor very light, but just such a man as one would pass by unnoticed under ordinary circumstances.

His face was a strong one, smooth-shaven; the different features too strongly marked for beauty, though the combination gave the impression of a good-looking fellow. His brown hair was close-clipped, showing a bit over the broad and high forehead as the brown derby hat tipped far back on his head.

His garb was neat and fashionably cut, of business pattern, the material having been chosen with an eye to service in a rough region as well as for outward show.

A round leather strap crossed his right shoulder, joining near his left hip in a bright silver swivel and clasp, the whole lending support to a neat grip-sack of alligator leather.

In age he might have been placed anywhere

between thirty and forty years, with the chances in favor of a just average between those two points.

"But, what did he do?" persisted the foremost citizen, as none other came to his aid in that perplexed moment.

"Lost his sand, for one thing," was the prompt reply, as the other dropped his empty pistol and opened his grip by a touch on the silver fastening. "Went flatly back on his contract without warning, then, added bitter insult to smarting injury by— Pardon these tears, gentlemen!"

His clear tones suddenly grew husky, and once more a hand quickly brushed across his undimmed eyes.

An ugly growl came from among the gathered crowd, and, as though gaining courage from this sound, some one from among them cried out:

"He's tryin' fer to play roots onto us! It's bloody murder, an' that hollers mighty loud fer a rope 'ith a loop into the end o' it!"

"Give that calf more rope!" sharply cried the stranger. "Lead it to pasture, some of you who haven't anything better to do, and don't let him go on splitting the holy Sabbath wide open without cause. I'm bad enough, and anything more is worse than useless."

"Rope goes, but you'll go long with it, critter!"

"Unless you can prove that this is less than the brutal murder it seems on the face of it, stranger!" supplemented a middle-aged man, seemingly one of note in that bustling little mining-town. "You were seen to shoot the poor fellow repeatedly while he was begging for mercy. And—where are his weapons?"

"Runnin', beggin', an' never a sign of a gun! Ef that ain't bloody murder than I want to know!"

The crowd was growing more and more threatening, but, instead of flinching or showing other signs of fear, the man with the grip flashed up as with indignation, his eyes all aglow as he said:

"If all killing is murder, what becomes of your law courts and justice mills! Don't your judges calmly sentence stout and healthy men to death? Why? For the good of their fellow-beings, of course!"

"But this—"

"Is ditto for ditto—begging your pardon for taking the words out of your mouth, dear sir," with a suave bow as he took a bright object from the opened grip and removed his foot from the bosom of the fallen man. "Of course I hated to do it, but, business is business, and things had simmered down to such a point that there was no other course left open. So—if this is murder, you, and you, and all Capital City in a lump, for that matter, must bear the blame."

"But—you shot the poor devil down!"

"True, so far that my hand held the gun; but, what drove me to this extremity? You and yours! You and your stupid inability to appreciate a good thing when you see it! Why, man alive, just think of it!" twirling the bright object high above his head and catching it deftly as it descended, then causing the little tin box to spin swiftly on the tip of his smallest finger as he added:

"For two long, weary, heart-breaking and soul-sickening weeks have I been trying to make the citizens of this sleepy burg recognize a solid good thing when it was shown them! For a round fortnight I have fought against malicious fate until—why, would you believe it? as his blue-gray eyes cast a half reproachful glance toward the bloody face of the man lying in the dusty street. "Even Johnny, there, went back on us both! Even Johnny kicked over the traces and dared to hint that the whole thing was a blooming fraud!"

"And for that you murdered the poor devil?" cried the citizen, his face beginning to glow with honest indignation.

"Et tu Brute?" reproachfully murmured the man with the grip. "Are you all heathen in Capital City? Is there not one who can recognize and appreciate fine art when it meets him on the highway? Were you filling the busy brain of the great Soap-ite of the City of Broth-erly Love when he pathetically begged the public to 'Don't be a Clam?' If you are—well, I'm playing in even harder luck than I thought; and that was needless!"

Twisting the cover from the round tin box, the man of the grip dropped to his knees beside the prostrate figure, sighingly saying:

"It does look kind o' rough on you, Johnny, but, business is business, and I'm its prophet!"

Brushing the blood from that face, he dipped a finger into the yellow salve contained in the box, rapidly anointing the motionless man's forehead, seemingly forgetting the interested crowd about them.

Suddenly a coarse, angry voice blurted out:

"Oh, ring a bell, somebody! It's nothin' but a durned fake!"

CHAPTER II.

A SILVER-TONGUED FAKIR.

TRULY, that scented unguent proved fairly magical in its workings, for, with almost the first touch, that lower jaw began to close, those

rigidly-extended arms began to move toward the body, and when the man with the grip-sack deftly drew a handkerchief across the fallen man's face to wipe his brow, his patient rose to a sitting posture with a long, gasping breath of intense relief!

"Glory to Moses!"

"Glory unto Franklin Buttercup Dewey, Johnny," amended the other, rising to his feet and gazing proudly about him, in no wise shaken by the mingled groans, hisses, and cat-calls which came from all sides as the assembly began to realize how completely they had been deceived. "Give the devil his due, Johnny!"

"I do—I am, boss," was the meekly enthusiastic response, as the dusty figure rose to his feet and stretched his limbs cautiously, like one unable wholly to trust the evidence of his own senses. "Glory to Dewey, the marvelous inventor of a more mar—I say, boss?"

"Say on, Johnny."

"Would it do me hurt to dance a hoe-down, for glory's sake?"

"You really *were* dead, Johnny?"

"Too dead to skin!" came the prompt response.

"Then there wasn't any fake about it, as one gentleman so kindly insinuated a moment ago?"

"Boss, I was clean dead. So mighty dead that I went all the way to the gates o' Paradise and knocked for admittance!"

"Yet you came back. Johnny, you ought to have hung on when you had a fair chance, for you'll never get so close to heaven again!"

"The Magic Salve did it, boss," with a softening of his tones as he gazed affectionately at the little tin box in his employer's hand. "I couldn't hold out against *that*. And then—well, I couldn't 'a' made the rifle anyway."

"How so?"

"The gatekeeper asked me where I came from, and when I told him Capital City, he shook his head and drew the bolts tighter as he called me a bald-headed fraud. He declared that no one on that side of the barrier had ever heard of such a place!"

This "chestnut" was fairly well received by the assembly, and the man with the grip-sack beamed blandly as his keen eyes roved about him before making the most of his opportunity.

"Unless my ears deceived me a bit ago, I heard some gentleman whisper something about this being all a monstrous fake," he said, speaking smoothly. "I'll not say that he lied, for that would be libelous, even if true; but, I will say this much: let him come to the front, as bold as his own speech. Let me deliberately empty a six-shooter into his skull. Let the whole crowd examine him and declare that he is indeed dead. Then I'll rub his wounds with a little of this truly marvelous compound, and if it don't cure him—if it don't restore him to life and perfect health again inside of ten minutes by the watch—I'll admit Dewey's Magic Salve a fraud, and myself a fakir of the first-water!"

"I'd ruther take your word fer it—heap sight!" grinned the rough-clad miner.

"Good enough! And, take a box as a reward for your manly apology," nodded the fakir, tossing it across to the fellow. "If it ever fails you in time of need, address 'Silver-tongued Sid Harper,' and name the fitting penalty. And, while I'm talking, gentlemen, if any among you wish to put out a simple quarter of a dollar where it will return a million-fold interest, just put on a bold face and interview Johnny Mitchell, here. Only two-bits, twenty-five cents or a quarter of a dollar, whichever coin you may happen to come across first. I'm not at all particular, except when asked about my slate; *that* was broken when the landlord kicked me out of my last lodging-place."

"To return: this marvelous compound, gentlemen—this Magic Salve—this infallible cure-all of the nineteenth century! I've been singing its praises for the past two years, and yet I've only got half-way through the alphabet of its manifold virtues. Life itself is too short for one man to even begin to enumerate its miraculous qualities. And so—well, to make matters a little bit clearer, I hired Johnny, here, to give a public test where all might see and understand.

"Johnny is a fine little fellow, but, this time, his nerve went back on him when the pinch came. He wanted to jump his contract. And so I had to take him on the fly, as it were, and trust to luck for an audience befitting the occasion. But, I'll simply make the statement now—while the eager gentlemen pass in single file before Johnny to get their boxes (with two-bits each, please remember)—that each afternoon until further notice, Johnny will die and I will resurrect him, all in full view of the astounded public."

"What's the stuff good for, anyway?" asked one man, hesitating before giving up his silver for one of the little boxes.

"Good for anything and everything, from corns to old age. Why, gentlemen, I had a grandfather, once, just turning his first century, bald-headed as an egg and toothless as the hen that laid it. The poor old gentleman was bent double with age and natural infirmities—bent so double that he had to use a mirror to keep from hitting his big toe and his nose mixed up whenever the latter needed a handkerchief!"

"He was so old and childish that I gave him a bright box of Magic Salve to play with, one day, and, somehow, he got the cover off and daubed the compound all over himself. We washed him off—wife and I—but the mischief was done! I have no grandfather, now! Instead, my poor wife has to stay at home to mind the baby, and I have to pay for a wet-nurse. Just think of it! A baby almost turning his one-hundred-and-first year!"

"But you asked what is it good for? Let me tell you a bit about its talented inventor: Francis Brigham Dewey."

"Time was when F. B. made a living butchering wood. He called himself a carpenter, but no one kicked at that; it pleased him, and did not hurt them. Well, one day Dewey was working on a house. His thoughts were a good deal busier than his hands, for he was even then inventing this glorious combination. His eyes were busier than either, for a buxom young widow was passing by. And Dewey, besides losing his head, lost his balance, falling to the ground and fracturing his ankle."

"It was a bad break, in more senses than one, but F. Brigham came out ahead in the long run. He not only completed his invention while lying crippled, but proved his faith by becoming his own patient."

"He used the salve freely, but at that time he had not hit on the precise proportion of the ingredients, and instead of mending his broken ankle, the salve caused a new foot to sprout out!"

"It was a fine foot—a beautiful foot, in fact—and Dewey actually fell in love with it from the very start. And, by the time this new foot had become fully grown, the original Jacobs, no longer needed for use, had become petrified, then painlessly dropped off, just like an overripe peach."

"Now, Frank B. walks on his new foot, using the other as a paper weight to hold down the love letters on his desk."

"That is only a single instance of the many which I might bring forward to prove that Dewey's Magic Salve is the greatest discovery of this or any other age. All it needs or asks for is a fair trial. Failure is impossible when directions are faithfully followed, and they are plainly printed on each and every box. Only twenty-five coppers, and Johnny holds the grip from which the eager may be supplied. No rush, gentlemen; it's Sunday, and this is a mining-town."

"But as I started to say; this isn't a money-making scheme, and you don't want to jump to that conclusion. Dewey isn't built that way. I'm traveling on a salary, and pay-day comes whether I sell one box or ten thousand. And the more I sell, the less Dewey makes, for it costs a round dollar to put up each twenty-five cent box of the Magic!"

"Oh, come off!" cried a scoffing voice from the crowd, as a tall, odd-looking figure pressed forward. "What's the use o' lyin' when the truth'll do jest as well an' better, too?"

"A David come to judgment!" laughed Silver-tongued Sid, his keen eyes running from top to toe of that loose-jointed, gangling figure. "Buy a box, stranger, and use it for a bath; it can't well make you more awkward, and may reconstruct your frame until it resembles the human race a little more nearly. Do—I beg of you!"

A laugh ran through the crowd, more because of the look of rage which took possession of the tall fellow than from those words. The merriment seemed to sting, and with a forced grin the fellow slouched forward with clinched fists, sourly growling:

"I'll box you, dug-gun ye! You'll want a box when I'm clean done o' gittin' through with ye, or I'm a—*Ow-wow!*"

He made a rush as he cleared the circle of human beings, aiming a vicious blow at that smiling countenance, only to have his wrist caught by one hand, while with the other Silver-tongued Sid fairly twisted him clear of the ground, heaving him into the air and shaking him much as a terrier shakes a rat. Then, with a scornful laugh the Grip-sack Sharp dropped his groaning victim to the ground, stepping back a pace, with hands in readiness for attack or defense as further needs might call for.

But, the fellow lay where he had fallen, throwing his long limbs about as in agony, groaning and gasping hoarsely:

"Help! my legs—arms—mercy!"

The crowd gazed in open-mouthed amazement now that their eyes were drawn to those members, for, to all seeming, that contemptuous shaking administered by Silver-tongued Sid had actually dislocated each and every member of the poor fellow's body!

His arms and legs were frightfully twisted, forming sharp and unnatural angles at each joint, and he seemed to be suffering all the torments of the damned.

"Holy smoke!" ejaculated Silver-tongued Sid, snatching a box of salve from the hand of Johnny Mitchell, then dropping to his knees by the side of the sufferer. "I knew he was put up by a mighty awkward architect, but I never thought—Steady, partner!"

In rapid succession he rubbed salve on the

joints, giving each a gentle twist and a pull, then drew back with a light laugh of satisfaction.

"Pick up your bones and walk, partner! You're just as well as you ever was, and inside of twenty-four hours you'll be so much better that you'll be begging an introduction to the shapely, handsome and graceful fellow who's wearing your wardrobe!"

Breathlessly, seemingly half-afraid to put it to the test, the fellow rose to his feet, testing each straightened limb at first, then fairly bubbling over with joyous laughter as he rushed over to where Johnny Mitchell had charge of the grip-sack, pulling out some coin and begging for a supply of the Magic Salve.

"Waal, I will be durned!" disgustedly snorted one of the inner circle, as something of the truth burst on his puzzled wits. "'Nother gum-game, or I'm a howlin' liar!"

"Sold ag'in, and Johnny takes the tin!" cheerily laughed Silver-tongued Sid. "Tricks in all trades but ours, and we're pure genuine. If any one doubts it I'll be happy to dislocate anything but his neck, and I'll even do that if he'll first assume all risks."

"But, as I was saying, all this is for the benefit of suffering humanity, and Frank B. Dewey's motto is 'Yours for health!' Not exactly original, but true. Dewey is running a race with the late lamented Eliza Pinkham. Frank B. is a little ahead just now, with Eliza close to his coat-tails. May Lizzie P. soon catch him, say I!"

The silver-tongued fakir paused to moisten his lips, but, before he could resume, there came a sudden and startling alarm from beyond the crowd; the hoarse, panting notes of a human voice crying aloud:

"Murder—vengeance!"

CHAPTER III.

WHEREIN TWO SNAKES COME TOGETHER.

"PRETTY as a picture, but—Confound the girl! Does she mean to stay put all day?"

Terry Mack snapped his jaws together with a vicious sound, scowling blackly through the bunch of half-dry grass which topped the rock behind which he was half-crouching, half-lying.

He was none too handsome even when in the best of humors; Terry Mack, with his bushy beard and thick hair, both as red as the brush of a fox; with his forehead, nose and such portions of his skin as could be seen through the thinner edges of hair, covered over with great brown freckles; with his heavy frame, his stumpy limbs, his great flat feet and his hairy hands, the latter all blotched with freckles even larger than those on his face and neck.

None too handsome even when rigged out in his every-day garb so suitable for his present position in life—a digger for gold.

But, now that he wore a suit of "store clothes," with "bald-faced shirt and long-horned collar," while his face was twisted into a scowl that expressed as much anxiety as it did impatience, Terry Mack was absolutely ugly, in a physical as well as moral sense.

His deep-set eyes, overhung with shaggy brows, glowed with a venomous light as they rested on the trim, graceful figure now showing in the cabin doorway—a living picture in a humble frame.

The distance was too great for Terry Mack to distinctly note the expression resting upon that fair young face, but her attitude: with the sharp of one hand touching her forehead as her lithe, well-proportioned figure leaned slightly forward, gazing down the faintly-defined trail which led toward the mining-town of Capital City, that told him plainly enough that Retta Sparrow was waiting and watching for the coming of some person whom she had cause to expect.

"Which one?" Terry Mack mentally asked himself, his wiry beard bristling as he forced an ugly smile. "The old man? The young man? Father or sweetheart! Old Jonah, or young Roger? Devil blow slack-lime up his trowsers!"

Not a very choice expression, but what it lacked in elegance was more than made up by fervency, and Terry Mack gripped the butt of a heavy revolver which nestled beneath his "Sunday coat" with a hand that only lacked a fair opportunity to become that of another Cain.

His eager gaze never left the maiden's figure while she stood in the doorway. His breath came more quickly as he saw her turn away, fading from his sight in the comparative darkness beneath the roof.

"Git your hat—take a walk, can't ye?" he growled, impatiently, as he strained his sight to catch another glimpse of the girl. "I never thought the time'd come when I could hate ye, Retta, but—you've got to pull out—got to, d'y' hear?"

The earnestness with which he repeated these words would have seemed fairly ludicrous to an unprejudiced observer, had such been near enough to have caught that guarded whisper, if only from the precautions taken by the spy to escape observation from the being thus commanded.

For just then Terry Mack caught a glimpse of Retta Sparrow moving inside the cabin, and he ducked his head downward and backward so swiftly and in such haste that he struck his chin against the rock, cutting his growling short.

But, that muffled curse was not caused altogether by the sharp pain which filled his eyes with moisture. Instead of leaving the cabin, Retta drew a low, splint-bottom rocker forward, settling herself in the doorway where she could both see and watch the winding trail below.

"Confound a woman, anyway!" growled the spy. "I never yet knew one to do what was expected or desired of her. She's planted—watching for—which one? Is old Jonah the cabin, snoring off his last jag? Is it young Glynn she's playing sentinel for?"

He crawled a little distance back from the grass-topped boulder, rising up and sweeping the broken ground beyond with keen eyes. He failed to detect aught human, either coming or going.

"Good enough so far, but how much longer will it last?" he mumbled, turning back to steal another view of Retta Sparrow, only to find her occupying the same position. "She's got to come out o' that—but how?"

One set of stumpy fingers raked his scalp, the other tugged at his brick-hued beard. His eyes rolled upward as though seeking inspiration from the cloudless vault overhead.

"It's a bit more risk than I bargained for, but it's got to be worked. Come out o' that, pretty! Tain't often I'm so mighty anxious to drive you away, but just now—come out o' that!"

Rapidly skulking along under cover of the rocks, Terry Mack gained a point which he fancied more favorable for his new-born scheme, but from where he could still steal a view of the anxious maiden as she sat at her post of duty.

Forming a sort of trumpet of his hollowed palms, bending his head lower and turning his face from the cabin, Terry Mack sent forth a husky cry:

"Retta—girly—help me!"

There was something ventriloquial in the effort, and the voice seemed that of one many rods from that ragged boulder. And Terry Mack chuckled grimly as he stole a look toward the cabin, to see Retta Sparrow spring to her feet with an eagerness that upset her chair, bending forward with hand curved behind an ear, her face full of strong anxiety.

"Once more'll work the racket, I reckon, sweetness!" the rascal laughed, bending his head and repeating that peculiar call.

Another glance showed him the girl, running lightly along the path, and, fearing lest her excited eyes should detect his presence, he crouched low down and scuttled through the rocks like some misshapen serpent.

"Never counted on the time coming when I'd be running away from a meeting with you, sweetheart!" he chuckled, pausing behind cover to gain another sight of the maiden as she hurried past his first hiding-place. "Wouldn't have you drop to the fact for the world—not even for an undivided whole of the Forlorn Hope!"

Even before the words cleared his lips, Terry Mack was in motion again, making his way over the broken ground toward the rear of Jonah Sparrow's little cabin home with all the skill and activity of a born mountaineer, though his "Sunday rig" suffered somewhat in the process.

He paused twice, pricking up his ears as he caught the clear notes of Retta's voice calling aloud to her father.

"Better than good enough!" he grinned, showing his teeth. "The old soak is out, then! I reckoned on as much, but I couldn't be dead sure. Keep on a-hunting, sweetness! If I might only have left my voice floating loose out yonder in the rocks!"

It required time for even one so active to pick a way through that difficult stretch, and Terry Mack dared not take to the open, as yet. Retta had keen eyes, and might at any moment take a backward glance when no answer came to her calls, and it was none of his wish to be seen on the premises that day.

Forced to scale the rocks and approach the cabin from the rear, Terry made what haste he could, at length gliding up to the little log house with cat-like footsteps. Even though he felt sure the huge old miner was not within, it was not in his nature to act boldly.

The rear door yielded to his touch, swinging silently open. Mack, with hand on a half-drawn pistol, glanced inside, seeing naught to alarm him. And with a low, ugly laugh the spy stole inside, his eager eyes resting on one end of a loosened plank at the foot of the bed occupied o' nights by Jonah Sparrow.

"Only a fool or a drunkard would pick out such a clumsy hiding-place," he chuckled, bending over the spot thus marked for a single moment, one hand dropping into the little opening. "The old man is both lucky for We, Us & Co!"

He sprung erect so abruptly that it seemed as though a spring must have been touched in his bowed back, his redly glowing eyes turning toward the open door in front. And an ugly oath.

came over his lips as he caught sight of Retta retracing her steps.

He knew that he could not escape by the front way without being seen and recognized, and, for reasons of his own he did not want his visit discovered that day.

He opened the rear door barely wide enough to let his clumsy figure slip through, fearful lest Retta should suspect something from seeing the cabin brightened up by the double opening.

"I've got to risk that, but she'll never sight me before I'm safe hid among the rocks up yonder," he reflected, making the best of his way along the winding path which he had followed in coming.

He was nearly at the top of the slope, crawling almost on his hands and knees the better to escape discovery should Retta see fit to look back of the cabin. The bare rocks rose high on either hand. The passage was narrow, with barely room for so broad a figure to penetrate without rubbing an elbow on each side.

Then—with a startled curse, Terry Mack sprung back and rose to his, for, coiled right in his path was a rattlesnake on guard!

The reptile was of unusual size for that region, though but a pygmy in comparison with the famed "timber rattlesnakes" of the Southern States; but, as that ugly, flattened head pointed toward him, Terry shivered as though he had come in contact with the great-grandfather of all venomous serpents.

He swiftly drew his knife and flung it at the snake, but his aim was imperfect, and the weapon glanced past, leaving the rattler unharmed and still more vicious. Its tail shot up a few inches, then quivered so rapidly that his eye could not follow the motions. The warning was sounding its gage of battle.

Terry Mack cast a glance backward like one who thinks of inglorious flight, but as he did so he saw the little cabin below, and that sight caused him to crouch quickly down again.

"Satan scorch the varmint!" he growled, viciously, plucking at the revolver in his girdle. "If I was only on the other side o' the rocks, I'd catch it and roast it over a slow fire!"

He knew that Retta Sparrow must have nearly or quite regained her home, by this. He knew that she would surely discover him should she open the back door.

Yet the way was barred for him, the snake showed no signs of retreating. Instead, it seemed inclined to assume the offensive. It was slowly moving forward, but without destroying its coil, still keeping a quarter of its length drawn into a wave, ready to straighten out and send its poison-laden fangs home at a moment's warning.

In such emergencies men's wits work swiftly, and, after a hasty summing up of his chances, Mack drew his revolver and leveled it at that lance-shaped head.

Pulling trigger the instant his aim was perfect, the human snake leaped high into the air, landing safely on the other side of the now harmless serpent, whirling about with a swift glance at the cabin below.

The rear door was flung hastily open, and Retta Sparrow stood revealed, taking in the scene with suspicious eyes.

Terry saw this, but showed no signs as he bent over and secured his knife, then lifted the quivering body of the snake on the muzzle of his revolver, giving a well-feigned start as his eyes rested on that trim figure below him.

"Hope I didn't frighten you, Miss Retta," he cried, easily, moving down the path toward the building, holding the snake in full view as he added: "An ugly customer to have for a close neighbor, my dear!"

"At least it gives warning before it strikes, Mr. Mack!"

CHAPTER IV.

A BRUTAL WOOING.

TERRY dropped the snake from his pistol and crushed its writhings with a heavy heel, but he could not entirely hide his chagrin. That speech was too pointed for him to pass it by wholly without notice, greatly as he would have preferred so doing, just then.

"As a rule, but this time was an exception. We came together so unexpectedly to both, that it struck and I shot, without stopping for warning or thought. Your father is—"

"Where, Mr. Mack?" her earnest brown eyes fixed intently upon his flushed face. "What have you done with him?"

"It Done with him? I don't catch on, Miss Retta."

"Was it your voice that called, over yonder? Did you try to draw me away from the house, only a few minutes ago?"

Terry gazed into her pale face with distended eyes. His acting was almost perfect, yet Retta still suspected him, more by instinct than through reason, however.

"I came over the hills, this way," with a jerk of his head to the rear. "I was at the Forlorn Hope, seeing that things were all right. I didn't know but what I'd find the old gent there; he wasn't about all day yesterday. So—I came this way, to see if all was well with him."

"You were going away, then, finding no one

at home?" persisted the maiden, still with that embarrassing gaze.

"I didn't— Say what you mean in plain words, please!"

"I saw the door open, and a human figure slip out the back way. I came here—I saw you. Do you still insist that you just arrived?"

She faced the spy firmly, her tall, slender figure drawn erect, her eyes coming to the top of his red head. There was suspicion in her tones, and still stronger dislike in her pale, proud face.

Terry Mack was never noted for his patience, and now his ugly temper flashed forth with hardly an effort at disguise.

"I don't understand your hints, Retta Sparrow, but let them go. I put myself out in hopes of doing your father a service, and you treat me like a dog! All right: I can stand it if you can. Only—when you next see the old man, break his bottle if it holds anything, and sober him up enough to comprehend that there's trouble brewing—black, deadly trouble, unless he can show clean hands!"

"What are you insinuating?" sharply demanded Retta, turning a thought paler, moving back and entering the house as he showed an inclination to come to closer quarters. "Take care how you insult my father, Terry Mack! I'm only a girl, but I can fight for him!"

"He'll need your help, if there's any truth in the rumors that have taken wings of late," with an ugly smile as he passed the girl, to pause on the threshold.

"Once more: what do you mean?"

"People are beginning to talk, if you must know, then, my lady. People are beginning to wonder if Jonah Sparrow gets all his dust from the Forlorn Hope, or if these recent thefts—"

The sentence was cut short by her slender fingers smiting him sharply across the lips. Only the hand of a girl, but the burly rascal staggered as though a heavy fist had dealt the blow.

Only for an instant. Then, his eyes flaming evilly, his face hotly flushed, he sprung forward and caught her about the waist with one hand, while with the other he grasped her neck from behind, to steady her head as he cried, harshly:

"I can't strike back, but I never receive a blow without wiping it out, my pretty virago! A kiss for a—"

Retta struggled in his grasp, and then, just as his foul lips were about to pollute hers, an explosion came, and with a harsh cry of mingled fear and rage, the ruffian released her, clapping both hands to his eyes and beating out the flame that curled and charred his fiery beard.

He stumbled over the threshold, falling outside in an awkward heap, but swiftly recovered himself, just in time to see a revolver drop to the floor at the feet of the startled maiden.

It was his own, which she had plucked from his belt and discharged without aim, in her extremity.

"I did not—you forced it upon me"—she panted, but starting back as Mack sprung forward to recover the weapon.

He was unharmed by the shot, though the flame had scorched his beard and blinded him for an instant. And, as they both realized as much, each grew calmer and more natural.

"I was a fool, Miss Sparrow, and deserved just such a lesson," said Mack, falling back a pace or two as he replaced the pistol in its scabbard. "But, you were not wholly free from blame. You drove me to desperation with your doubts and harsh suspicions. I—the best, firmest and almost the only friend your poor father has left to him! I, do him harm? And he your father?"

"You bitterly insulted me—through him, and I never wish to see your face again," cried Retta, motioning him away. "You are not a friend. From the very first you have pandered to his unfortunate appetite—from the first you have helped him down the hill to— Go, and never come back here again!"

As her agitation increased, Mack grew cooler. A grim smile stole into his face as he listened, but he showed no haste to accept his dismissal. Since his visit was known, he would make the best of it.

"Jonah Sparrow employed me as foreman; Jonah Sparrow is the only one who has the power to discharge me. And when he learns what I have only recently found out, be sure he'll think more than once before sending away his best, sturdiest friend."

"You have proven his worst enemy!"

"Am I a bottle?" laughed the burly ruffian, showing his teeth as he noted the swift wave of color coming into her pale face. "All right; play I am. Out comes the cork, Retta!"

He cast a swift glance around the spot, but could see nothing to alter the determination which he had arrived at. None other were in sight, and he might have his say out in security.

"I've gone my way, letting you go yours, Retta Sparrow," his tones growing more earnest, his manner softening down but seeming all the more disagreeable for that, in her eyes. "I've never let on that I saw in you more than a little girl, the daughter of the one who gave me employment. And yet—from the very first I have loved you!"

"Which I consider an insult," was the cold interjection.

"You can say so, because your eyes are not yet fairly open. When you learn to see things as they really are—listen, Retta Sparrow," his tones hardening as the maiden partly turned away, a hand on the door as though about to close it in his face as the shortest method of ending an unpleasant interview. "For your old father's sake listen!"

"Where is he? What have you done with him?"

"I came here to find and warn him of danger, Retta. I'm mighty sorry he's away, for—there's bitter black trouble brewing, and I doubt if he can avert it save by hasty and prolonged flight!"

"I do not doubt," her tall, slender figure drawing proudly erect. "Why should he flee? My father has committed no crime. He never did harm to mortal being in all his life!"

"Save to himself—I admit as much, Retta," with just the ghost of a smile. "But all the same, he is in deadly peril of his life. The people are talking. They say that—how can I tell you, little girl?" with abrupt softening of his tones, strong pity coming into his face.

"Don't try. Your face is lie enough. You know the road to town, Terry Mack. Take it, and forget the way back to this house."

"To make room for more agreeable company, no doubt?" sneeringly laughed the ruffian, throwing off all disguise in the smarting caused by that cold contempt. "Let him wait for his betters. Now I've got fairly started, I'll have my say out, even if I have to shout it through a closed door.

"I wanted to soften the blow to you, girl, but you wouldn't have it that way. Now—I'll tell you in so many words that Jonah Sparrow stands accused of being the famous masked robber who has stripped so many of the men hereabouts of late days!"

"You lie when you utter the words, Terry Mack! No honest man could ever bring such a foul and unfounded charge. Jonah Sparrow is honest, if unfortunate, and—"

"Did I say he was not, Retta? I know he is honest. I know that he never even thought of such a method of adding to his store. But others take a very different view of the case, and those others are the ones—worse luck!—who will have the judging of him!"

"They will have their trouble for reward, then. My father can easily prove his complete innocence. And when he has done this—when he has shown where he was on each occasion a robbery was committed—"

"But can he do that?" slowly asked Terry Mack. "Suppose a date was brought up when—well, you know that the old gent has spells of forgetfulness, when he can tell nothing of his own actions."

Retta bowed her head and covered her face with her hands. Only too well she knew this; only too readily did she realize the degrading truth.

For Jonah Sparrow was a slave to the bottle, and more than once he had passed days in drunken stupor, sometimes watched over and cared for by his sad, dry-eyed daughter, at others lying where he had succumbed to the demon of strong drink, lost to all consciousness, a mental and moral wreck.

"It's an ugly subject to dwell upon with a daughter, but, little woman, I love you too dearly to let you go on in blindness until it is forever too late. Your father is innocent; I know that, though my love for you is so strong that I'd still try to save him, even though I knew him guilty of even worse than they charge. And being innocent, I'm here to help him all I can. Where is he, now?"

Retta shivered, but made no reply, still keeping her face hidden. She did not know where Jonah Sparrow was, but she did know that he had been drinking again; that he had a full flask of whisky with him when he last left that cabin.

"You know his failing, Retta," more softly. "You know that he is hardly fit to care for himself, at such times. It'll be hard and dangerous work to save him from the lynchers, but if you'll trust me—if you'll only give me a little hope that in the end you'll be my own dear wife—"

"Stop!" Retta exclaimed, lifting her head and imperiously waving a hand toward him. "I'd sooner die!"

Even as the swift words passed her lips, there came such a startling change into her face that Mack instinctively wheeled, to gaze in the same direction her great brown eyes had taken. And an ugly curse parted his lips as he recognized that rapidly advancing figure, young, sturdy, manly, if somewhat undersized.

His blue eyes glowed redly, and his voice contained an ugly growl as he hastily muttered:

"It's Shorty—your lover! Is that why you're in such haste to send me away?"

"Go, I tell you!"

"And I tell you this: lock your lips—keep what has passed between us a profound secret, above all from Roger Glyn—or it'll be the worse for him! Mind—a crooked word and he chaws lead!"

There was no time for a more ample warning, for the new-comer hastened his steps as he recognized the twain. And there was a frown upon his face as he glanced from face to face, noting the traces of recent strong agitation on that of his lady-love.

"You've been at your old tricks, Terry Mack?" he sternly cried. "Your room is better than your company. Take a walk!"

"Maybe you'd better try to make me, Little Runt!" sneered Mack, jerking out a pistol, only to have Retta spring between them, crying:

"Hold! you must shoot me, first!"

"And I, too, say hold hard!" came a musical echo.

CHAPTER V.

MAT SINGREY'S ACCUSATION.

SILVER-TONGUED Sid seemed fully as much startled by that wild interruption as any one present, but the citizens had already learned to look twice at his actions before venturing to judge, and from their ranks came a warning voice:

"Look out fer 'nother s'ply o' roots, boys! Dollars to cents it's comin' ag'in fer to ketch us suckers!"

"Murder! help—pardner!" hoarsely panted that voice, and now the crowd could catch a glimpse of a ragged, blood-marked figure staggering out of a cross-street, waving hands above its head wildly in the attempt to attract attention.

"No roots thar!" cried one of those who had a fair view of the new-comer. "It's Mat Singrey, from the Little Brown Jug!"

"Vengeance!" cried the forlorn-looking shape, pausing in his unsteady advance and bracing his uncertain limbs long enough to shake a clinched hand in the air. "Poor Dan—butchered—clean butchered by inches!"

"No roots thar!" repeated the burly miner, making a rush toward the new-comer. "It's work fer the rope, or I'm mighty 'way off!"

Silver-tongued Sid had spoken not a word since the first interruption, and now he sprung to where John Mitchell stood with the grip-sack in charge. He caught this up and hung it to the shoulder-strap by the silver-plated clasp, then began to move with the crowd.

It seemed as though Mat Singrey had held up just long enough to give that wild appeal for vengeance where it stood a good chance of being caught up by willing hearts, then gave way completely.

Before the nearest or the most eager could gain his side, the man reeled, to sink in a limp and faintly shivering heap, looking more dead than living.

His head was bare, his garments torn and stained with blood. Ugly streaks of red marked his haggard face, and his hands were soiled with the same significant evidence of violence.

A tall gray-bearded man was the first to reach the side of the fallen man, and dropping to both knees he slipped an arm under to lift that heavy head, quickly crying:

"What's happened, Singrey? Who did it? Where's Dan Bryson?"

Only a feeble man answered him. A spasmodic shiver shook the wounded man's frame, then he lay still and limp as though life had indeed passed away for all time.

"Back! you're shutting off the air!" sternly cried the old man, motioning back the excited crowd with a free hand as they came closer, anxious to hear and eager to see all. "Back, ye fools! Give the poor devil a chance, can't ye?"

There was an instinctive recoil, the circle spreading a bit, and Silver-tongued Sid was prompt to take advantage of it, slipping through an opening which, small at first, was readily made large enough for his sturdy person as he coolly cried:

"Make way, gents! Make room for the doctor, please!"

The gray-beard frowned as he glanced up at that call, only to recognize the glib-tongued fakir of a brief space before, and his voice grew harsh as he uttered:

"This is no time for tom-foolery, sir! The man is dying—with his story untold!"

"I was a physician before I picked up a sure thing," coolly declared Harper, bending over the prostrate figure with a face and air that really seemed professional enough to satisfy the most critical. "Maybe I'll serve your turn until you can scare up a regular pill-box."

"Mercy—don't—God above! see the blood!"

Barely distinguishable came the first words, but then, with a choking cry that caused the blood to chill in many a stout heart within hearing, the wounded man sprung half erect, pointing with one shivering hand at some imaginary object, while with the other he covered his averted eyes.

"Steady! hold him level, pardner!" commanded Grip-sack Sid, unclasping the receptacle from which he had taken his title. "He wants a bit o' bracing up, first off, and I've got something here that'll put life into a cast-iron monkey. Just hold him—"

"Is this a time for quackery? Make way—"

But, the gray-beard stopped short as he saw,

not a box of the much-vaunted Magic Salve, but a wicker-covered flask.

"Genuine Otard. Limber up a steel rod. Raise the dead. Cure anything from—Steady, pardner!"

The flask was opened, a portion of its contents carefully poured into the mouth of the wounded man, then Silver-tongued Sid poured a little into his hand, bathing the blood-stained brow.

"Head sound as a gourd!" he muttered, as the blood came off, showing no signs of wound or injury there. "Hope he isn't infringing on my patent!"

"It's here—he's shot or cut close over the heart."

With deft touch Sidney Harper satisfied himself that the gray-beard was right; Mat Singrey had been shot or stabbed in the left shoulder. He had bled so freely, the stuff clotting heavily on his clothes above and about the wound, that one could not readily decide just which implement had been used upon him.

In addition to this Silver-tongued Sid found a cut in the right side, and a number of ugly bruises on the top of his head.

All too slowly for the excited crowd, Mat Singrey began to revive under these ministrations. For a little he seemed delirious, faintly muttering much the same words as he had at first. He called aloud for vengeance, for help, for mercy, all in one and the same breath. He uttered the name of his partner, Daniel Bryson, then recoiled in horror from the red blood—the sea of gore, as it seemed to him.

But, little by little his strength came back as Silver-tongued Sid spared not his precious brandy, and his first really connected speech came in resisting their attempt to examine his wounds more closely.

"Don't—it'll start 'em again!" he muttered, pushing their hands away. "Wait—look to—poor Dan'el!"

"Right enough," nodded Sid, in answer to the questioning glance of the gray-beard. "The blood has clotted and forms as good a bandage as one could ask for, just now. Better find out what has happened, as near as the poor fellow can tell it."

This remark was received with great favor by the curious crowd, but it was easier to utter than to put into execution. Mat Singrey seemed utterly broken down, even when his scattered senses came back to him, and despite the longing for vengeance which he at first expressed, he was very slow in making his charge.

He had no difficulty in recognizing the gray-beard, whom he called Cap Dawson, but he visibly shrank from Sidney Harper, so plainly showing aversion or uneasiness that the glib-tongued fakir could not longer ignore the fact.

"Never mention it, pardner," with a bland smile in answer to the look given him by Dawson. "Must humor patients. Call again when he's better balanced. Wish you luck—and information!"

Closing his grip, the fakir rose and fell back a pace or two, outwardly cool and indifferent, but really watching the wounded man closely.

"You're with good friends, Singrey," soothingly uttered Dawson, holding his natural impatience in check with rare skill. "You're not badly hurt, and we'll soon have you 'round again, sounder than ever. Now—if you could just drop a hint as to what has happened—"

"Bloody murder—no less!" shivered Singrey, his lids closing.

"You escaped, and Bryson may have been as fortunate."

"Dead—didn't I see him butchered?" groaned the man, his face growing more haggard than ever. "Butchered—and I couldn't help him! My pard—my gold—all gone!"

"Who done it? Spit it out, Mat! Give us a hint, an' we'll run the p'izen critter up a rope—too mighty quick!"

Not in one alone, but in a dozen voices came this cry, and as it reached his ears, Mat Singrey seemed to rally a bit.

Cap Dawson caught at one of the many bottles proffered him, and gave the injured man a free draught. The powerful liquor seemed to brace him up, and a tinge of color crept back to his thin face.

"It looks like crowding a man when he's down, Singrey, but for the sake of justice you must speak out. If poor Bryson is murdered, the crime must not go unavenged," said Dawson, his voice grave and stern.

"I know—I'm getting back my strength," muttered Singrey, rallying with an evident effort, though there was a fearful, haunted light in his eyes as they ran quickly over those eager faces about them.

"When did it happen? And how?" persisted Dawson.

"Last night—I can't say just when. I was asleep. The first I remember is waking up, all standing. And by the moonlight that shone through the open window, I saw a big man stooping over Bryson as he lay asleep."

"A big man?" echoed Dawson, as the other paused, with a shivering breath. "Could you see his face?"

"No—not then—only his general shape," was the husky reply. "It startled me so that I

started up with a yell. Then—the cabin seemed all ablaze, and I went down—shot through and through!"

"He shot you—this big fellow?"

Singrey nodded assent, catching up the bottle and drinking freely.

"Yes—he shot me. It keeled me over, stunned, like, but I could see and hear, though it all seemed a dream. And I saw poor Dan jump up. And I saw—that devil shoot him plum full o' holes!"

Once more his voice choked, but the ugly sound which ran through the excited crowd seemed to act as a restorative; in his trouble, Mat Singrey may have mistaken its purport, and fancied it directed against himself.

"I'll tell it all—as fast as I can," he mumbled shivering. "It was horrible—it's knocked me all crazy!"

"Brace up, man!" frowned Dawson. "Time is passing, and if we're to be of service to poor Bryson, the quicker we know all the better. You say he was shot by that big fellow?"

"Like a dog!" flashed Singrey, his eyes beginning to show the effects of his heavy drinking. "He didn't have a show for himself. Just filled chuck full o' lead! And then—it broke the spell, I reckon. Anyway, I jumped up and tried to save him—my pard!"

"And then?"

"The devil turned on me—with a knife! He cut me—he fell on top—the last I know he was hammering me on the head. And poor Dan'el—ah!"

Once more he gave way, his head falling back, his limbs shivering convulsively, and he paid no attention to Dawson's calls.

"Whar's that mighty gum-stickum?" cried a coarse voice from the crowd. "Now's yer chancie fer to prove she ain't all a fraud, critter!"

"On hand, like a wart!" promptly retorted Silver-tongued Sid, advancing and producing a bright tin box from his grip as he dropped to his knees by the side of the wounded wretch. "Steady—so!" he added, as he opened the man's shirt and touched the wound with something taken from the box. "Wake up, John Henry!"

He rose to his feet and drew back, just in time to escape the wildly-tossing arms of the injured man, from whose lips came a yell.

"Devil! you've poisoned me! Help! I'm all on fire!"

"Wouldn't give a copper for medicine that didn't take hold with tooth and toe-nails," nodded the fakir, complacently. "It's a dead sure cure, if you can only stand up under the pressure for a few minutes. All the same, though, you'd better tell us the name of that bloody murdering big fellow, pardner!"

"Who was it, Singrey?" asked Dawson, more soothingly. "Don't be afraid to tell all. You're among good friends, who'll see you come to no harm if you only speak out. Give his name, man!"

"I will—I meant to, all along. It was—Jonah Sparrow!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SILENT WITNESS.

CAP DAWSON drew back with a startled ejaculation as this totally unexpected name fell from the lips of the wounded miner, and his surprise seemed shared by nearly every one within ear-shot.

"Take thought—you're dead sure, Singrey?" he asked, earnestly. "It means the rope, remember!"

"I saw him—he struck a light to find our store of dust," was the steadier addition, now that the worst was over. "I swear that Jonah Sparrow did the bloody work! I saw him—I bear witness against him—he butchered poor Dan—he nearly murdered me!"

A single breath of silence; then an ugly chorus arose, growing from a low muttering to a hoarse, savage roar for vengeance.

Cap Dawson sprung to his feet, lifting his thin hands appealingly as he flashed his bright black eyes round about.

"Steady, men!" he cried, sternly. "Be and act like men, not like a set of ravening wild beasts."

"Git a rope!"

"Fu'st ketch the critter!"

"That's easy 'nough, fer we know his hole!" laughed a burly miner as he stretched out a hairy hand in the direction of the lonely cabin.

Silver-tongued Sid kept silence, gradually falling back until he was in close company with the two men who had helped him to introduce his Magic Salve; but if his tongue was still, his eyes were at work.

Cap Dawson bravely flung himself into the breach, though none knew better than he how much risk he ran while trying to stem the tide. Let the crowd once gain the suspicion that he was favoring the accused, and in their blind passion they would crush him without mercy.

"Don't forget poor Daniel Bryson, friends," he urged. "Singrey escaped with life, after being left for dead; why not his partner? First go to the Little Brown Jug—first help a friend, if help be possible."

"An' so give the bloody murderer a chalice fer to git cl'ar?"

"If he wanted to flee, wouldn't he be far away before this? The crime was committed last night; it is now high noon; at least ten long hours in which he could make good his escape, if he wanted to flee. But if he believed he had killed both victims, why run away? Why act so as to surely bring suspicion upon his head?"

"Solid good sense, that!" contributed Sidney Harper.

A mob is easily swayed, when the right note is struck, and now the cry was all for hastening at once to the Little Brown Jug, that being the title given the claim worked in partnership by Mat Singrey and Daniel Bryson.

The wounded man staggered to his feet, but his hour had passed, and no one paid any notice to him. The excited crowd surged past, heading for the hills, with only one thought in their minds: to reach the scene of that grim midnight tragedy as quickly as possible.

Silver-tongued Sid seemed fully as much interested as any, and in company with his two aides he kept pace with the crowd, at the head of which showed the tall figure of Cap Dawson.

"He's a good man, from what I've seen, but he can boss this gang best by letting it go its own gait!" grimly muttered the fakir, more to himself than for the benefit of his companions.

For some little distance beyond the mining-town, the rush lasted without a break, but then, as a point was reached where came a division in the trail, the disorderly mob came to an abrupt halt.

"What's the use o' trampin' all the way to the Jug, jest fer to come back ag'in?" roared one burly fellow, springing into the side trail and commanding attention by wildly brandishing his arms. "Ef Mat Singrey spotted the critter, what's the matter with takin' the shortest cut right thar to ketch him red-handed?"

"Keep on as we started, men!" sternly cried Dawson, frowning darkly at this unlooked-for check. "Think of poor Dan Bryson, maybe groaning out his feeble remnant of life, calling for help which you refuse to give him!"

"Think o' pore Mat Singrey an'— Hellow!"

The fellow broke off in genuine surprise, for even as he uttered that name, its owner came staggering through the mass, looking wildly haggard, his eyes feverishly bright.

"Vengeance!" he panted, flinging up his hands and shaking his tightly clinched fists. "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth! Kill—even as he killed! Vengeance on— Agh-gh-h!"

His hands came down to press tightly over his breast, tearing at the blood-stiffened garments above his wound.

"Poisoned! the fires o' hell—put it out!"

Silver-tongued Sid boldly pressed forward, catching the reeling figure in his arms, deftly lowering it upon one knee while he rapidly opened the saturated shirt and rubbed something over the wound.

"Jump him, some o' ye!" snarled one of the more distant men as he noted this action. "Shell a durned fraud p'izen—"

"Poison your grandmother!" laughed the fakir, with a fearlessly defiant glance in that direction. "Ask Singrey— How goes it, pard?"

"All right—it's like heaven after hell!" sighed the wounded man, his head drooping heavily.

"Because the medicine is taking hold in earnest," nodded Harper, gently lowering his burden to the ground, where his head and shoulders were supported against a rock. "And as for poison—I use the same box of stuff each time: the never failing all-healing Magic Salve! Invented by Frank B. Dewey. Price only twenty-five cents, with a chromo thrown in if you can only slip it under your coat while the boss is looking the other way. Only— But excuse me, the gentleman is about to chin a bit on his own hook."

"Don't—don't rob me!" suddenly cried Singrey, his bony hands working before his face, half-repelling, half-clutching at the vision brought up by fever and excitement. "I've worked so hard! I've put my life, my heart's blood into every ounce o' the dust! For—Coming, Mary, wife! Coming—with gold for you and the—the kids!"

"Back! don't crowd in and shut off the air!" cried Dawson, strongly agitated and fearing the worst as he knelt beside the injured miner. "Singrey—rouse up! Speak to me, old fellow, for—"

"Eh! Dawson?" faintly muttered the wounded man, opening his eyes with a ghostly smile flitting across his haggard face. "You won't let them suffer? You'll ward off starvation?"

"As Heaven hears me, I will!"

"Then—tell Mary I tried so hard to make a pile! Tell her I was almost ready to come back to her and the—the babies! I was going to sell out my share—Bryson was talking of buying, only last night, so I could go back. And now—"

He broke off with a sharp shiver, his eyes closing, his head sinking back against the rock.

There was a brief silence, then the old cry broke forth—the cry for human blood!

Again did Cap Dawson spring into the breach, begging the mob to stick to the original plan of first paying the Little Brown Jug a visit before

thinking of arresting the man accused of such an ugly deed.

His will was good, and under almost any other circumstances, his influence would have prevailed almost without opposition, but now the lust for human blood, which is so readily roused in men of this class, threatened to carry all before it.

After giving Matthew Singrey relief from that terrible burning in his wound, Sidney Harper had fallen back, preferring to be an onlooker to taking a more active part just then.

Through all that raving he keenly watched Singrey, and a peculiar glitter came into his blue-gray eyes as his massive jaws grew squarer.

"Mighty good acting, but—it's only acting, all the same!" he mentally decided as he watched. "What's he playing for? What sort of stake is he after? Why is he so hot to have Jonah Sparrow lynched before we pay his cabin a visit?"

Grip-Sack Sid was unable to answer his own questions, though he felt morally certain such answers would prove no less interesting than sensational. And that belief led him to drop his reserve and come to the aid of Cap Dawson the moment he saw that worthy losing the ground he was so stubbornly contesting.

"Right is right, and you can't make wrong out of it, gentlemen," he cried, coming forward. "On my credit as a physician I declare that Mat Singrey is delirious; that he has been crazy ever since he came among us this day; how much longer I'll not venture to say."

"His hurts is sober 'nough, I reckon, ain't they?" growled the burly fellow who took the lead of those who favored finding the criminal without further delay.

"His hurts have unsettled his brain. He may be right in saying that he recognized the man who gave them, but he may also be wrong. If you lynch Jonah Sparrow first, then find out that he was innocent, how are you going to class yourselves? Why run the risk of murdering, when by a visit to the spot where the deed was done, you can pick up the right trail and find plain proof of the criminal?"

"What ef they ain't no signs left?"

"Then go arrest Jonah Sparrow and make him prove his whereabouts through all last night," was the prompt response. "Come, men of Capital City! Don't give other towns the chance to sneer at you! Act white yourselves, and let others go play dirt!"

With those words Silver-tongued Sid sprung forward along the trail which led to the Little Brown Jug, followed closely by John Mitchell and Timothy Timberlake, each one joining in his cheer. And catching at the chance, Cap Dawson followed after, crying:

"This way, all honest men! We'll do right, let those do wrong who know no better! This way, white men!"

The tide was turned. A dozen men sprung after with cheers, and the rest followed with growing ardor, fearing lest those ahead would solve the mystery first. And then, growling sullenly, the leader of the opposition brought up the rear, leaving only Matthew Singrey at the junction of the two trails.

The trail was by no means a short one, and before its end was reached, the crowd had fairly well calmed down. And when the scene of the tragedy was reached, the majority were prepared to judge matters just as they found them.

Ugly enough!

The door of the rude little hut, half of sticks, half of rocks, was wide open, just as Mat Singrey had left it when he staggered out to make his painful way to Capital City.

Inside, lying in a pool of his own blood, was all that remained of the recently strong, hearty, handsome Daniel Bryson.

His forehead and hair was one mask of blood. His shirt was thickly stained, and through a tear on the bosom a bullet-hole could be detected.

All around were signs of a terrible struggle, showing that he had not succumbed without making a desperate fight for life.

Silently Cap Dawson bent over the ghastly shape, but his pale face grew even graver as he shook his head. And though he made way for Silver-tongued Sid, he did not watch that examination closely, his gaze wandering about the room in search of some positive clew to the author of that foul crime.

Other eyes were busy, and as Sidney Harper rose and silently left the cabin, stern men searched the one room for sign. Only to give over in despair.

"What's the use? Didn't I tell ye so?" snarled the burly digger who had tried to divert that rush to another trail. "Singrey told who done it, an' now— fer a neck to fill a rope! Fer Jonah Sparrow!"

That was enough. The crowd, once more a howling mob, rushed off to avenge the silent witness lying yonder in his gore!

Only Sidney Harper and his two aides lingered, Mitchell asking:

"What's up now, boss?"

"We'd be fools to help hang a man for a murder not yet completed!" curtly responded the silver-tongued fakir.

CHAPTER VII.

A FAIR MISTRESS-AT-ARMS.

With a sudden uprising of his worst passions, Terry Mack forgot his good resolutions and only for the swift interposition of Retta Sparrow, he would have used the pistol he so deftly drew.

On the other hand, Roger Glynn thought more of the maiden's safety than he did of his own. He made no move toward drawing a weapon, his hands closing quickly yet even then with tenderness on the arms of the woman whom he loved, pushing her out of line with that threatened shot.

Both actions were almost simultaneous, and though that second voice had come as an echo to the cry given by Retta each man had given a fair sample of his nature before realizing that at least one other witness was close at hand.

A medium-sized but thoroughbred looking horse came swiftly into view a little to the West, its hoofs making a clattering noise as they struck the flinty strip of ground. A strong hand plucked at the stiff curb, bringing the snorting animal to its haunches. Then—

"I say hold, and you ought to know what that means, Terry Mack!"

"The devil!"

Terry started back, changing countenance as he cast a glance over his shoulder, but he made no move toward replacing the pistol in its scabbard.

The taut rein slackened a bit, and a touch of a spurred heel sent the black horse forward, to halt within a score feet of that little group. And with her gloved right hand toying with the butt of a small but serviceable revolver, the fair rider glanced quickly from face to face like one interested in learning the truth as quickly as possible.

Retta Sparrow shrunk back a little, but with his arm still about her slender waist, Roger Glynn hastily muttered, reassuringly:

"It's Coraline—Miss Hudson, Retta. Don't be afraid—she'll prove your friend, if you'll only let her."

Almost as tall as the miner's daughter, but of a much fuller figure, each curve and contour of which was admirably displayed by her neatly fitting riding-habit of bottle-green cloth, Coraline Hudson formed a more than pleasing picture as she sat her black steed.

Her cheeks were tinged with a healthy red, born of a wild gallop through the pure air of the mountains. Her eyes, large, bright, speaking as those of a doe, just now glistered with a far more dangerous light as they rested on the sullen miner.

"Terry Mack!"

Her mellow voice rung out clear and distinct, but the man addressed started as though another rattlesnake had sounded its warning skirt.

He shot an ugly scowl toward that proudly beautiful face, but only gave a sullen growl by way of answer.

"Terry Mack!"

Sharper with a touch of anger now, and through his shaggy brown the head of fire caught a silver gleam as the pearl-handled revolver rose an inch or two from the green-clad knee across which the weapon had been resting.

He knew enough of the fair amazon to realize that her next call might easily take a still more dangerous shape, and sulkily snapped:

"What of it? Reckon I ain't deaf, yit!"

"Drop that gun, Terry Mack," coldly ordered the rider in green.

The red-headed ruffian flashed an ugly glance toward his rival instead of promptly obeying.

He saw that Retta had shrunk away, now standing alone, hesitating between flight and fear of leaving her lover wholly unguarded.

He saw that Roger Glynn had drawn a pistol, either before or since Coraline Hudson put in an appearance, and he shrunk back a bit as he snarled:

"Look at him—he's heeled, ain't he?"

"Terry Mack, drop that gun!"

Cold as ice, came the words, and quickly following them a shot from that dangerous toy.

The miner started back, ducking his head swiftly to one side as he felt something pluck viciously at his thick beard; but before he could fairly realize that Coraline Hudson had sent a bullet through the fiery mass, her voice rung out once more:

"Third and last call, Terry Mack! Drop that gun!"

The revolver was staring him full in the face, and as he caught sight of those black eyes flashing along the silver-plated tube, he knew that his life hung by a flimsy thread.

The heavy pistol fell from his unnerved fingers, and his empty hands rose shivering above his head as he huskily muttered:

"It's bloody murder if you let him shoot—an' me—"

The amazon laughed lightly, but, with a contempt in her notes that not only cut his plea short, but brought a hot and angry flush to his briefly blanched face.

"Roger Glynn, must I read you the same sort of a lesson?" the woman cried, turning toward the younger man, though as she did so her pistol-muzzle lowered to its former resting-place across her knee.

"Your's to command, 'Miss Hudson!'" bowed the young miner, quickly replacing his weapon in his belt. "I beg your pardon. I only drew in self-defense."

"Not mine, but hers," and the rider bowed toward the shrinking maiden. "Miss Sparrow, I believe? Never mind ceremony," she swiftly added, her rich color deepening as she noted how Roger Glynn flushed up and looked embarrassed. "I've seen the young lady before, and out here in this wooden country we can worry along without regular knock-downs."

Roger shifted uneasily on his feet. Mack lowered his hands and suffered a malicious grin to steal into his florid face. And though Retta Sparrow felt a debt of gratitude for this opportune coming, still she shrank instinctively from that brilliant beauty of whom she had heard so much.

Nothing seriously to her disadvantage, however, judged after mining-camp morals; but Retta had not spent all her young life amid such wild surroundings, and her maiden curiosity regarding this queenly creature was tempered with both moral and physical fear.

For more than a year past "Queen Coraline" had been one of the "lions" of Capital City. David Hudson, who called himself her brother, owned and ran "The Free for All," a saloon and gambling room which had from the opening night taken first rank in town.

At first it was generally supposed that the twain were man and wife, but when, a few nights after the place was opened, the tall, handsome gambler introduced Coraline Hudson to his patrons, he bade them honor his sister as they would himself whenever her fair hand deigned to take the helm.

Only once was that warning ignored, and before those drunken lips could complete the insult, they were cruelly torn by a bullet, and the luckless fellow was spitting out teeth and bits of his tongue as a dozen pair of heavy feet lifted him by turns toward the street.

Much more had Retta Sparrow heard concerning this beautiful amazon, for she had often led Roger Glynn to talk about Queen Coraline, but though he told her of many instances in which the woman had figured with credit, had related her many kind and charitable deeds, Retta never heard or thought of her without a peculiar thrill of fear and aversion running over her.

Those brilliant black eyes took everything in, and Queen Coraline would have been more or less than a woman if she had not resolved to read them one and all a lesson.

"Terry Mack—Roger Glynn—eyes to the front!" she cried, her voice growing bard, despite the trace of mockery lingering behind it. "Look each other over, please, and bear in mind that what you see is but a poor reflection of yourself."

"I haven't got time to waste in foolishness," growled Mack, stooping to pick up his revolver, but springing nimbly back to keep from being borne down by those trampling hoofs as the black steed plunged forward.

Just how it was accomplished, even those who looked on could not clearly explain, but, when Queen Coraline rose once more erect in the saddle, she held that heavy revolver in her hand.

"Don't you be in such a rush, Terry," she coolly nodded, detaching the loaded cylinder and tossing away the now useless frame. "You two idiots wanted a scrap, and I'm here to see that one or the other of you gets his fill."

"Oh, I mean every word of it, gentlemen!" with a crisp nod as she leaped to the ground and sent her steed to one side by a slap on the hip. "You two overgrown boys have been playing the fool long enough."

"For months you have been showing your teeth at each other, strutting about like bantam cocks, trying to make the world believe nothing would please you better than to have a buckle for blood. For months you have not only been annoying your lady-love, but a nuisance to the community at large."

"What business is it of yours?" sulkily demanded Mack.

"I'm making it my business, since your squabbling has destroyed the quiet pleasure of my morning's ride. I'd let you shoot each other as you started out to do, only then I'd have the trouble of helping to hang the murderer. So—come up to the scratch and prove yourselves worthy at least a passing glance from those pretty brown eyes yonder!"

Catching up her habit in front with one hand, Queen Coraline drew her spurred heel across the ground midway between the twain, drawing back with a light laugh as her bright eyes roved from face to face.

"One's afraid, and t'other da'sn't!" she laughed, recalling the boyish taunt as she saw how reluctant the two men seemed to avail themselves of her original offer. "Was it all empty wind, then? Cowards both? Disarm and toe the scratch! I'll mark for life the one who hangs back now, and have it recorded as the brand of a cur!"

"Put up your gun—let me have mine back, and I'll fight him too mighty sudden!" growled Mack, savagely.

"No, no!" shudderingly gasped Retta, but Queen Coraline quickly put an arm about her waist, hurriedly whispering in her ear:

"Better a few bruises that way than shooting to kill! It's bound to come to a fight, and I'm playing the surest card to bring about peace in the end. Don't tremble, silly! Put in a prayer for the one you love best!"

With a light laugh Queen Coraline turned once more to the men.

"Shooting and cutting is barred. Don't forget that this is the Seventh day! Give me your gun, Master Glynn—thanks!" with a bow and a brilliant smile that brought the warm blood to his face. "Hands up, Terry! Your word is good, but I prefer my own knowledge, you see!"

With pistol in one hand she quickly satisfied herself that the red-haired miner had no other pistol, removing the knife from his belt, and then falling back as she added:

"Toe the mark, gentlemen! It's to be a prize fight, and the victor carries off fair lady! Time!"

Roger Glynn cast a swift glance toward pale, trembling Retta, and his honest face grew dogged as he spoke:

"I'll fight the villain quick enough, but I'll never agree to that part. Leave Miss Sparrow out of the business, if you please."

"That won't save you the licking, though!" harshly laughed Mack, stepping to the mark, confident in his greater weight, height and strength. "You'll never—"

He had something else to do besides talking, just then, for, without the slightest pretense at science, Glynn made a savage rush, closing at once, both men falling locked together, without even a single blow having been struck.

Retta gave a cry of terror and would have sprung forward, only for the restraining hand of the fair mistress-at-arms, who laughingly cried:

"Have you so little faith in true love, Retta Sparrow? With you looking on, Roger Glynn could whip the world's champion, silly!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SHADOW OF COMING EVENTS.

FAST locked in each other's arms, unable to inflict much if any punishment, the two men rolled back and forth, each one striving to turn his adversary and secure an advantageous position on top, when the victory would be but a matter of time.

To a cool observer the scene was more ludicrous than terrible, and Queen Coraline laughed mockingly as she watched the progress of the struggle which she had brought about in revenge for those telltale looks of a short time before.

Her arm was still about Retta's waist, and the poor girl was sobbing her fears for her lover, hardly conscious of how completely she was betraying her sweet secret.

And all four were so intent on that one subject that neither of them noticed the approach of another character.

He came from toward town, and though that portion of the trail was comparatively smooth and level, his feet were lifted high, to be plaited in turn with the grave deliberation seldom seen save in one who wishes to impress all observers with his complete soberness.

He was almost gigantic in size and breadth of shoulder, his bodily dimensions seeming all the more imposing from his stiffly erect manner of progression, coupled with his owl-like gravity.

His large head was covered with slightly curling locks of iron-gray hair, the ends of which came down to his shoulders, mingling with his patriarchal beard, once richly brown, but now showing signs of growing age.

His features were strong, rather than finely-cut, yet he was what the world would term a handsome fellow, on a large scale, though the close observer would have noted marks of long dissipation and moral weakness. There were lines drawn by something else besides age, and only strong waters could have dimmed his big blue eyes and marked them with so many little veins of blood.

His garb was of coarse, substantial stuff, now bearing tell-tale marks of a night passed other than in bed. Those broad shoulders bore stains of dried mud, and one sleeve was reddened in spots by blood, yet fresh enough to show that many hours had not passed since it left human veins.

"Steady, Jonah!" he muttered, catching sight of his cabin. "Take a brace, old rascal! Retta is thar—Retta has most mighty sharp eyes o' late whenever—eh?" stopping short and rubbing his bleared eyes as he first noticed human beings before his cabin door. "Comp'ny? An' Retta—what?"

Though as yet unable to fully distinguish what was taking place in front of his cabin, Jonah Sparrow realized that something beyond the ordinary was transpiring, and he quickened his pace to a run, his long legs carrying him swiftly over the intervening space.

Retta was the first to recognize him, and an appealing cry broke from her lips as she stretched out her arms toward him.

Jonah Sparrow sprung toward her, though half-doubting as he saw his child in the embrace of a woman. Then, as Retta broke away from Queen Coraline, whose laughing face had grown

cold and hard at sight of the giant: as Retta turned with a sobbing cry toward the still madly struggling men, the big miner changed his course enough to carry him to their side as they fought like bull-dogs.

One of his great hands closed upon each, and with an effort he broke their holds, tearing them apart, lifting each upon his feet and holding them thus long enough to gain a fair view of their scratched and dusty faces.

"Fight, will ye?" he rumbled, swinging the two men close together and bumping head against head with impartial force. "Kick up a robbery in my dooryard o' Sunday, I reckon? Break the peace all to pieces when the old man isn't at home to—Eb, birdy?"

Retta caught the arm whose hand held Roger Glynn helpless, and though she could not articulate, he easily interpreted her sobbing plea.

"Go, you!" and he flung Mack half a dozen paces away. "How do you do, Mr. Glynn? Hope I see you well?" to the other, relaxing his mighty grip and gravely holding his palm open for a hand-clasp.

Terry cleared his eyes of dirt and sweat, mechanically fumbling at his waist for a weapon, as yet hardly realizing what had happened. But, before he could do more or say aught, Queen Coraline caught him by the arm, hurrying him away, followed by her well trained steed.

Retta flung an arm about the neck of her lover, who was too dizzy from those stunning knocks and his brief but desperate grapple with the burly digger, for speedy speech.

Jonah Sparrow stared after the woman and her disordered companion, neither of whom he recognized, just then. The fumes of bad whisky still obscured his wits and blinded his judgment.

"Don't—I'm all right, sweetheart," muttered Roger, patting the little head that rested against his shoulder. "That rascal didn't—"

"Holy smoke!" abruptly ejaculated the gigantic miner, a rift of light penetrating his befogged wits at last. "If that wasn't Terry Mack, I want to know!"

Retta released her lover, hastily whispering:

"Wait—by the spring—I must—poor father!"

Jonah Sparrow caught her last words and drew his magnificent form rigidly erect as he gravely uttered:

"Morning, birdy! Breakfast 'most ready? Had a—a glorious tramp through the—ahem! Surely there was a dew this beautiful morning?"

It was far more pitiful than ludicrous, this effort to disguise his degradation from those loving eyes, and with a sudden dimness in his own honest orbs that did his heart credit, Roger Glynn turned abruptly away toward the little spring which supplied the cabin with water for all purposes.

Retta strove hard to control her emotions, forcing a smile and pretending to lean upon that strong arm, instead of steady those still uncertain steps toward the house.

With his dulled wits wholly bent on hiding his actual condition from the child whom, despite his moral weakness, he loved to idolatry, Jonah Sparrow had already forgotten the strange drama which his coming home had cut short, and mumbling something about being ready for breakfast, he dropped down upon his low bed as soon as he entered the cabin.

Retta, choking back her tears, hustled about as though preparing the meal, but just as past experience had warned her would be the case, five minutes had not passed before Jonah Sparrow was lying on his back, snoring loudly, fast locked in slumber.

The poor girl paused long enough to dry her eyes, giving them a little dash of cold water to remove the redness, then softly stole out doors, seeking consolation where she had so often found it before.

Roger Glynn was awaiting her coming at the spring, having as far as possible removed the traces of his recent struggle. He forced a smile as she drew near, but even with so much else to trouble her, Retta detected the effort thus made.

"You, too, Roger!" she half-sobbed, sinking down on the little rustic seat near the bubbling spring that came from under the gray rocks.

He was wise in his generation, this undersized young miner, and in silence he passed an arm gently about her lithe waist, drawing her head down to his shoulder, resting his cheek against it as he gently stroked the hand that lay in her lap.

Never a word did he speak, yet had his tongue run on never so glibly it could not have given her so much comfort and support.

Gradually her sobs grew less violent. Little by little her trembling subsided. And then, gently, gravely yet cheerfully Roger bade her hope for the best.

"It may be the last time—this may be the turning point in his life, little lady. Try to hope, as I do, that he'll never again forget what he owes to himself, as well as to the angel who watches over and prays for his perfect cure."

"Roger!" Retta abruptly cried, drawing far enough away from her lover to look him squarely in the face. "Roger, is there nothing worse?"

I thought that bad enough—God knows it has almost broken my heart, time without number!"

"Try to forget—try to hope on, little woman," he softly said.

"No," resisting the arm that sought to draw her back to her former position. "I must tell you—I must know just what there is to fear, Roger. That Terry Mack—"

"I'll break his confounded neck before sunset!"

"He hinted—he told me such terrible things, though I would not even listen, much less believe him. And yet—Roger, you love me?"

"Better than all the world—with heaven thrown in, Retta," was the earnest, yet quiet response.

"Then by that love I beg you to be perfectly frank and open with me, dear," still resisting his efforts to draw her nearer, still watching his face with that piteously appealing gaze. "Roger—do people talk—about father?"

Roger Glynn almost felt like cursing the hot blood that he felt mounting into his face, but he did the best he could to cover it.

"They—Well, you know, Mr. Sparrow often goes to town, and—"

"I don't mean about—about his drinking to excess," swallowing the ugly lump and bravely forcing herself to speak clearly, resolved that now no mistake should be made because of her timidity. "Worse than that. Do they talk—have you heard his name coupled with any of these recent thefts and robberies?"

Roger Glynn would have given a hand for a face of stone just then, but he knew that his sensitive skin had betrayed him to those steady eyes, and he felt forced to admit at least a portion of the truth.

"People will talk, you know, Retta, but—"

"Then they have—Heaven pity us all!" the poor girl sobbed, bowing her head and covering her face with both hands, the hot tears trickling through her fingers to drop silently upon her lap below.

"But it's nothing more than idle, silly gossip, don't you see, dear Retta?" uneasily said the young miner. "The crimes were really committed, you know, and they must be fathered on some person. So—Well, I can't lie to you, little woman, though I'd sooner bite the tongue o' me off than even hint at as much—"

Retta suddenly lifted her head, gazing at him with eyes that fairly blazed through the tears as she cried:

"You, too, Roger Glynn! You also believe him guilty? My father?"

His face flushed hotly at that accusation, but his honest eyes met hers without flinching, and his reply came prompt enough:

"You wrong me, Retta. I'd as soon believe myself guilty as Jonah Sparrow. He may be weak—he is lamentably weak in some respects—but all the world couldn't make me believe him guilty of deliberate crime such as they—such as you hint at, Retta."

"Such as they charge him with, you were about to say, Roger? Then they do go that far?"

He reluctantly nodded assent.

"I can't lie to you, little woman, even to give you a false sense of security," he gravely said. "I've caught vague rumors for more than a week past, but I couldn't trace even one to its real source. If I had—But that don't matter," cutting himself short, with an honest dis-taste for aught that even savored of boasting.

"Of late the talk has grown plainer, and it was in hopes of having an earnest talk with your father, quite as much as my longing to see you, little lady, that I came up here to-day. I reckoned it might be wisest—well, for him and you to take a little trip away for a bit, until the trouble has time to blow—"

He stopped short, alarmed quite as much by his own senses as the start given by Retta Sparrow when she caught sight of armed men stealing silently about them. He sprung to his feet, sharply demanding:

"What do you mean? What's up now?"

"Murder is up—that's what! Whar's Jonah Sparrow?"

CHAPTER IX.

A SAMSON IN THE TOILS.

Her answer came from a big, burly fellow whom Roger Glynn recognized as one prominent in almost every disturbance Capital City had known since coming into existence, and he felt strongly tempted to draw his pistol and send a bullet through that brain, forever quieting its workings against peace and order.

But even as one hand instinctively moved to obey the impulse, he caught sight of other armed men drawing closer, and casting a startled glance around, he saw that the little cabin was nearly if not quite surrounded by the enemy.

His face paled, and he caught his breath sharply as he realized the truth; the blow against which he had sought to guard, was on the point of falling!

"Whar's ole man Sparrow, I ax ye ag'in?" impatiently added John Walkinshaw, the head and front of that rush for vengeance.

Retta shrank back with a subdued cry, shivering as she noted that inflamed countenance, those blood-shot eyes, and, above all, the knotted

rope which the big fellow carried in his huge paws.

One of his hands was lifted to touch or catch the maiden by an arm, but Roger Glynn sharply struck it down, pushing Retta back to interpose his own person.

"Hands off, you overgrown brute!" he sternly cried. "Touch the lady and I'll pound you worse than a tough beefsteak!"

It was like a bantam taking a fly at a shanghai, and despite the stern nature of their quest, an almost general laugh ran through the ranks of the avengers.

"Heel 'em alike, an' durned ef I wouldn't take evens onto the scrub!" cried one enthusiastic fancier. "He's weenty, but he weighs a clean ton when he gits his mad 'way up—yes he does, now!"

John Walkinshaw flushed up hotly, but he was not to be diverted from the purpose which brought him to that spot, and flashing an ugly glance toward the cabin he called out in warning:

"All eyes open, lads! It's jest a gum game fer to give the ole hoss a chance fer to skin out the back way! Open eyes—halt him ef he jumps! But don't clean cheat the rope o' its dues!"

Not until she heard these cruel sentences did Retta Sparrow fully comprehend the meaning of that assembly of armed men. Now she turned dizzily toward the cabin where her threatened father was lying unconscious of his deadly peril, trying to warn him in time to make good his flight; but only a feeble, choking cry rose in her throat.

John Walkinshaw saw and understood, for a coarse laugh of triumph parted his shaggy beard as he brandished his looped rope.

"Holed, by—! He's in yender, lads, an'—git out o' the way, both o' ye!"

His heavy hand swept around to brush the lovers aside, but before it could touch the maiden, Roger Glynn fiercely struck it down, then drove a hard-clinched fist fairly between the eyes of the burly miner, causing him to stagger back with a snarling oath.

"Go—to the house, Miss Sparrow!" he cried, raising his voice sharp and shrill. "Go—I'll keep these rascals at bay until—"

The gallant young fellow meant well, but unfortunately his weight and dimensions were against him.

John Walkinshaw rallied, coming back with a rush that crushed Roger Glynn to earth much as though he had been but a slender lad, and it might have fared badly with him had not a fresh interruption come just then.

These confused sounds, the shrill speech of the young man, added to the pitiful shriek with which Retta witnessed the downfall of her lover, all combined to break the sleep which had come over Jonah Sparrow. With a vague sense that something was going wrong, he rolled from bed and staggered to the door of the cabin, almost filling the aperture as he supported himself by a hand on either casing.

He was blinking in the bright sunshine, staring stupidly around, seeing yet unseeing, when his presence was discovered by one of the lynching party, who cried out:

"Thar he is! Thar's the bloody butcher, boys! Down him!"

John Walkinshaw released his antagonist and scrambled to his feet in his eagerness to retain the leadership, and Roger Glynn followed as quickly, screaming out at the top of his voice:

"Make a break—run for cover, Sparrow! It's life or—"

He was in the thick of the rush, striking out desperately, striving to hold the enemy back long enough for Jonah Sparrow to gain a fair start in his race for life; but even had the giant been in full possession of his wits, ready and eager to take all advantage, that self-sacrificing action would have been all in vain.

The cabin was surrounded by armed men, and vengeful, ready to kill where they could not take. They were closing in on all sides, forming a cordon which even a herculean effort could hardly have broken. And desperately as he struggled, Roger Glynn was cast down and run over much as though he had been but an image of straw!

Jonah Sparrow mumbled something—no one stopped to listen or to ask a repetition—but he made no attempt to flee or to resist arrest. He seemed in a stupor of mind and body, though the hands that fastened upon him were rough and ugly enough to have wakened anger in a far milder being than was the big fellow.

"Yar's the rope, an' I'm guaranteein' a snug fit or no charge!" harshly laughed Walkinshaw, dropping the loop over the bared head of the bewildered miner, stretching up a hand to draw the noose tight.

"Go slow, will you?" sharply cried Cap Dawson, striking down that hand and jerking the noose from about Sparrow's neck. "It's trying before hanging, remember!"

Handicapped by years and wounds received during the civil war, the veteran had been left behind in that headlong race for vengeance, but once up with the rest, he came to the front after a fashion that could not be mistaken.

An ugly sound came from the flushed lynchers, and despite the general respect in which the

veteran was held, it might have fared ill with him, just then, only for the coming of Retta Sparrow.

The crowd parted before her, like a dividing wave, and something akin to pity showed on more faces than one as the armed men saw how ghastly white her face showed, as they heard her choking sobs, her vain efforts to speak. But as soon as she had passed, their ranks closed again, hemming the cabin and its inhabitants in.

"Little birdy—what's the matter?" stammered Sparrow, clasping the poor girl in his strong arms, staring stupidly around, even yet unable to realize the situation. "Who's all this gang? What—Hope I see ye, gentlemen. Fine—Cryin', girly! Who—Cl'ar out o' this, you critters!" his deep voice rising almost to a roar as his big blue eyes began to flash.

Quickly yet gently he pushed Retta back into the cabin, his massive chest beginning to swell, his muscles working, his nostrils dilating, his great hands clinching tightly.

"Make a break—for dear life!" cried Roger Glynn, plunging forward and striving to clear a path through which the threatened miner might make his way.

"Down 'em both! Don't let him git away, ef ye hev to—"

Crash! came an iron fist full against his mouth, and John Walkinshaw pitched endlong through the crowd, stunned and bleeding.

But the end came swiftly. Roger Glynn was stricken down by a blow from a revolver-butt. Half a dozen men leaped upon John Sparrow. Time and again they were hurled aside, only to have their places supplied by others, no less determined.

They clung to those massive arms, dulling the force of those terrible blows, at the same time using their clubbed pistols whenever they could get in a blow. Blood began to flow over the giant's face, but he still kept his feet, still hurled strong men aside as though they were merely images stuffed with chaff, until a lariat tangled his feet and brought him down with a shock that caused the earth to tremble.

"Act white, men of Capital City!" cried Cap Dawson, panting from his share of the struggle. "Bind 'em fast, but don't give outsiders cause to accuse us all of foul murder!"

His voice had not lost all influence, for when that confused mass of legs and arms and writhing bodies separated, Jonah Sparrow lay helplessly bound, but living.

Roger Glynn also had his limbs fastened with stout ropes, though he had not yet recovered his senses from that heavy blow from behind.

Cap Dawson sprung across the threshold, lifting poor Retta in his arms and bearing her down to the spring, leaving others to search the cabin for proofs which might clear or condemn the giant miner.

"Stiddy, critters!" panted Walkinshaw, his words hardly articulate, so greatly had his face swollen after that terrible blow. "Jest a few inside—quit scrowdin', will ye?"

He still claimed the leadership, and though all were so intensely excited, none ventured to dispute his rights. With his burly figure almost filling the entrance, he designated those whom he preferred to have share his search, then bluntly ordered the rest to stand back.

"Keep a-lookin' all ye want, but don't shet out all the light. Ef they's anythin' in yar to show his ban' in murderin' pore Dan Bryson, bet yer sweet life they's eyes a-plenty fer to ketch onto it!"

Curiously enough, though his eyes were rapidly swelling shut from the effects of that knock-down blow, John Walkinshaw was the first to make any discovery of importance.

As though guided by bloodhound instinct, he caught sight of the loose plank at the end of the bed, and calling attention to it with a cry of triumph, he knelt down to thrust an empty band into the opening.

"Look!" with a hoarse burst of laughter, as he brought forth two stout canvas bags, such as many of those gathered about the cabin used for the purpose of carrying their wealth: dust, nuggets or coin. "Didn't I tell ye so?"

"Maybe they're his own, though," ventured one of the searchers.

"Maybe they be, but—durn the lick that darkened the two eyes o' he!" with a snarl as he held the bags up to the light. "They's marks onto 'em, but—"

"Das is mine! Mein Gott!" hoarsely cried a stalwart fellow, as he tore one of the sacks from Walkinshaw's hand. "He robs my gelt! He kills my frau—mein kinder!"

With trembling finger he pointed out the tell-tale letters, marked after a fashion described so often that hardly a soul in all Capital City could have mistaken the money-bag.

"And this—there's fresh blood upon it!" cried the man to whom Walkinshaw had tossed the other bag. "Blood—and Dan Bryson's mark in plain ink!"

Instant silence reigned, both inside and out of the cabin, for all ears had caught those damning words, and every one present knew what they meant. Then—

"Hang him! Run him up a tree! Set the shack afire an' toss him into the middle!"

First one voice, then another, all crying aloud for instant and thorough vengeance, all directed against the half-stupefied Samson lying out yonder in bonds. And just as the rush was made, honest Cap Dawson once more boldly sprang to the breach.

"Not here—not before the very eyes of his poor child!" he earnestly cried, fighting back the maddened crowd as best he could. "If he's guilty of murder, let him pay the just penalty, but don't murder the innocent girl as well! Hold, as ye are white men!"

Alone he coul' have done little, but other cool heads joined him and made the same plea; not mercy for the accused, but pity for the poor child upon whose innocent head this vile sinner had already brought so much and such bitter grief.

CHAPTER X.

A VICTIM ON GUARD.

IN the end, Cap Dawson and his backers won their point, partly because they did not ask too much, partly because there were no hanging facilities in close proximity.

"Ef they was a tree handy it'd be heap sight dif'rent," grimly laughed John Walkinshaw. "Bein' as they isn't, why, hold-off goes. It's bin nigh a year sence Rogue Apple-tree hed a crap o' fruit, anyway!"

And so it was decided.

Jonah Sparrow was to be conveyed to the big pine tree near the outskirts of the town, where more than one criminal had paid the penalty of his life, there to be hanged by the neck until dead.

Roger Glynn and Retta Sparrow were to be left at the cabin, under guard, more to prevent their following than aught else.

Through all this the lynchers had matters their own way.

Jonah Sparrow lay in bonds, seemingly half asleep, plainly betraying the effects of his recent debauch. It may be doubted if he at any time fully realized what was going on about him, or that his recent desperate struggle was anything more than an outbreak of purely animal instinct. Just so any wild beast might have sought to defend its young.

Retta Sparrow was still unconscious, providentially, and Roger Glynn, knowing that further struggling would be worse than vain, listened and watched in gloomy silence.

After the main point was finally decided, there was some little trouble about choosing a man to remain behind as guard over the young couple, for all were eager to witness the final punishment of the criminal, who had been caught red-handed, as it were.

"Tie 'em up an' let 'em lay in yender ontel some one kin come back when all's over," impatiently growled Walkinshaw.

"No, I like me not that," gravely uttered the man who had betrayed such powerful emotion when the empty money-bags were brought to light in the cabin. "Dis vhas my broerty, you see?" holding out the bag and pointing to the letters printed in black ink. "Doe vhas my letters: F. Z. Dot means Fritz Zimmer."

"Don't we know it? Hain't we hearn it all time an' ag'in too mighty often?" growled the burly miner, impatiently.

"I makes my oath dot vhay, you hear? All righdt!" with a grave bow as he tossed the money-bag to Cap Dawson. "Dhose vhas my vitness. I gare me not dot I see dhose efil rōper go deadt, yust so he bays, dot benaldy all oafer. So—I sdrops me here. I vhas blay me guardt while you hangs dot dief und rōpernein?"

There was no objection raised, for an acceptance left all others free to take part in the hanging-bee. And so, carrying Roger Glynn into the cabin, and lightly but securely stowing him away, leaving Retta unbound but still unconscious, lying on the bed in the inner or her own apartment, the mob moved off with the prisoner in their midst.

Fritz Zimmer watched them until they were hidden around the first bend in the trail, then seated himself on the threshold, filling and lighting his pipe, sighing softly as he did so.

He was a stalwart fellow, not yet middle-aged: tall, muscular, erect in bearing. His hair was yellow as new corn-silk, and his full beard had never known the touch of razor or shears. His chin and jaws were covered by a heavy coat of what looked almost like fur, out of which grew long hairs, fine and silken, the whole reminding one of the unplucked coat of a beaver.

This, with his full, light blue eyes, his marvelously clear complexion, his clean-cut features, seemed to proclaim the Scandinavian, but Fritz Zimmer was of purely German breed.

Roger Glynn knew him as an honest, if somewhat stolid, stupid fellow, and he knew, too, that Fritz Zimmer had bitter cause to hate the man who had robbed him of his hard-won gold, though he had never fully understood the particulars. The robbery had occurred before his coming to Capital City.

Roger only recalled this now as he felt it would be worse than vain to beg the guard to release his limbs, and though he burned to be free, that he might make one more fight for the

life of his sweetheart's father, he hesitated before begging the favor.

When he did so, Fritz Zimmer gravely shook his head.

"Oxcoose me, mein friendt. Dot vhas imhcsible."

"But—they'll murder the poor old man, and him too drunk to even realize that his life is in danger!" urged Glynn. "Think of it, man! It will kill his poor child, and—"

"I vhas dink me 'boudt some oder children as dhose!" gloomily frowned the guard, puffing at his pipe until the hot smoke swirled in clouds into his eyes, giving him an excuse for brushing a hand across the wet lids. "I vhas a fadder-vonce!"

"Then, by the memory of your children—"

"Dhose kinder vhas deadt, already!"

"Then by their graves I ask you to set me free!" persisted Roger, too excited, too eager to read aright those repeated interruptions.

Fritz Zimmer flung his pipe down, turning his blazing eyes upon the young miner, his face white as that of a corpse. But when he spoke, his voice was low and even, his sentences measured as though each and every word had to be weighed before finding birth.

"Off you blease, I makes me some leetle sbeeches. Off you blease, I ask you listen while I say me dot. Und when I gits me drough, den I dake my durn und hear all you vhatant to say. Ish dot vair, nein?"

"But while you're talking, those devils will be lynching my friend. Turn me loose, man! If I can't save him—"

"Off I dinks you do dot, I vould sthick you drough dot heardt off mein own aggord!" slowly uttered Zimmer, his eyes looking fairly red, so hotly did they glow. "Und now I dells you vhy I makes me veel like dose—nein?"

With a groan of impotent rage the young miner let his head fall back, closing his eyes in the vain effort to shut out that ugly vision of a strangling man—of her father being hung like a sheep-killing cur!

"I vhas a boor man when I gomes me oafer vrom Sharmany," slowly, gravely spoke Fritz Zimmer, his hands tight clasped on his knees, his big blue eyes staring vacantly out at the bright day. "I vhas hafe me a frau—wife, you gall dhose, nein? So—I haf me a wife."

"Und den—py und py—ve haf a leedle kinder—a shild baby; she vhas a leedle girl-voman. Und efter some more dimes she vhas haf a leedle sister. Und den—vhell, I works me dose vingers burty nigh by der bones ouldt, bud I makes me not enough money; und I see me dot wife, und dose shilder, vhas come dinner like a ghost, almosdt!"

"Und so—I leafs dem home, und gits dem all dose money I know how, und I gomes me ouldt here, to make a goot liffin' vor dem. Und I works—I works like von dog!"

"Py und py I makes me a glaim, und den I haf more gelt to send back py dot home. Und I sometimes laugh und tickle mineself dot I vhas soon pe readyt to go pack home to Katrina, und leedle Lena, und sthilk more leedle Kattie. I vhas mosdt grazy ven I dinks me oafer all dose dimes—grazy!"

He shook his head until the yellow locks floated about like a halo. He cleared his husky throat and violently winked the moisture from his big blue eyes. And though he forced a smile as he turned to glance at his prisoner, Roger Glynn shivered worse than he would had he seen a venomous scowl.

"Vhell, I makes me lots money. I vhas haf goot glaim. I hear beoble say I vhas haf money to drow py dogs off I geeks me up dot lick! Und I laughs me some more, und dink off dose wife und shilder und how dose all shumb by shoy when I gids me home sometimes!"

"Und I geeps me oop dot dinking undil I see vater all oafer my eyes easery dimes—hot vater dot blinds ouldt dose schweet vaces I loaves so vhell!"

"Und I gids me so I dinks I moost zell me ouldt as qevick like I vind a burchaser vor me, und makes dot shourney home in a shump! Und so—vhell, dot nighd when I haf all zold und all readyt und like dot—vhell, dot nighdt I vhas haf me all sthole!"

Roger writhed uneasily. He fancied he could hear poor Retta moaning beyond that closed door. He fancied he could see—he did see her father hanging—gods! how horrible!

"Und I neffer see me easen dot money-bag undil—undil I see me it vindt py dot hole oafer yonder!" with a grim nod toward the loose board from under which John Walkinshaw had taken the damning evidence. "Und you esk me—"

"It will kill her—don't murder the innocent in your longing for revenge against the guilty!" passionately cried Roger, striving in vain to burst his bonds. "She is only a poor, weak, helpless child!"

"Und so vhas Lena. Und so vhas Kattie. Und when I vhas loose all mein gelt—easery tollar! When I loose me dose—I loose me all!"

"L'sten py me voost a leedle lonker, mein friendt. Let me dell you how mein heardt go sblit vide oben. How I haf me bower voost enough to make me money dot bay me my vare home. Und when I makes me dot drip—vhell, I vinds me ouldt—vhat?"

"I vinds me dot mein vife got zick. I vinds me dot she vhas durn ouldt dot houses. I vinds me she haf no vriendt. Und—vhell, dot vhas foolishness py me, budt I vhas gry! So—vhell, dot Katrina. Dot Lena. Dot Kattie. All dbose vhas innozendant, nein? Dot vhasn't righdt dbose zuffer like dot? Und sdill—all dhose hef to die!"

"Katrina hears no more py me. She hef no money. She vhas grow zick all oafer; zick py her body, zick py her brain, zick py her heardt, vorser as all dhose odders!"

"Und so—she shumps dot riffer in! Und she dakes Lena, und Kattie, und my heardt py her in dot shump. Und so—you esk me let you go helb dot deffil dot rob me, dot kill mein vamily, dot makes me a oldt' man when I vhas sdill young?"

Had only his own life been at stake, Roger Glynn could not have persisted, gazing as he did into those eyes, so full of grief and bleak despair. But he caught another faint sound from the other room, and in his mental agony he begged and prayed—all in vain.

"I veels me sorry when I looks me dot vace in," gravely uttered Fritz Zimmer, shaking his head in negation. "I dinks me off mein leedle Kattie lif longer maype, she vhas look like does eyes. Bud all—"

An unmistakable groan came from the other room, and Roger Glynn uttered an agonizing cry, then panted:

"She is dying! Help her, you merciless devil!"

Fritz Zimmer sprung across the room and flung open the door, revealing poor Retta lying on her bed, moving restlessly, as yet hardly recovered from her swoon.

"She vhas yoost vaking oop, maype," hesitated Zimmer, turning to cast a glance over his shoulder at the young miner.

It is said that drowning men will catch at straws, and just so the ghost of a hope flashed across the prisoner's mind. If he could only get his guard out of sight for even a few brief seconds!

"Quick! get some water!" he panted, his face so full of strong emotion as to startle the naturally stolid German. "Not that!" as the guard turned toward the water-pail standing on its bench. "Fresh from the spring! Quick! cold water, or she'll die!"

Fritz Zimmer caught up the bucket and dashed out of the cabin, and knowing that he had no time to lose, Roger rolled swiftly over until he came to the now open door between the two rooms, crying earnestly:

"Retta, my love! Cut me loose! Retta, if you love your father!"

The poor girl started up, pressing one hand to her dizzily-throbbing temples, staring at the prostrate figure, but without recognizing it at first. And in mental agony Roger again beseeched her to get a knife and cut his bonds before it was forever too late.

Hardly conscious of what she was doing, Retta obeyed. None too soon, for just then the clear voice of Fritz Zimmer came to their ears:

"Comen, leedle laty!"

CHAPTER XI.

SILVER-TONGUED SID'S DISCOVERY.

"Give it up!" croaked Timothy Timberlake, owlishly wagging his ludicrously small, round head, while John Mitchell looked to the full as utterly puzzled.

The advocate of the Magic Salve seemed in no great haste to explain the meaning of his somewhat mysterious speech. He was gazing swiftly, keenly about, as though bent on making sure no others of the party had lingered in that vicinity.

Already far away, growing dimmer and less ugly, he could catch the fierce yells and cries of the mob. A troubled light came into his eyes, and deep concern showed in his strong face, if only briefly.

"It's mighty tough on the old man, but what can one, or three men do? What would we be but a mouthful to whet their appetite?"

"Three dozen couldn't stop that rush, if you're thinking of old man Sparrow, boss!" slowly assented John Mitchell.

Sidney Harper gave a slight start, flasing a look into the faces of the two men who had helped him introduce the wonderful panacea to the pick of Capital City. Then, without a word to either, he started away from the lone hut, making an irregular circuit, like one scouting a suspected precinct.

"If it wasn't a lie on the very face of it, I'd almost say the boss is nervous!" softly uttered Timberlake, gently scratching his lower jaw; for it could hardly be said that he had a chin.

"Hold your bush and wait for orders, mate. It's all in the day's work," soberly muttered Mitchell, in response.

That tour of inspection was quickly ended, and with his strong face once more under full control, Sidney Harper paused before his men.

"They've struck the trail, and never a bloodhound of 'em all has even a thought left for yonder poor devil inside."

"Reckon they think it's cool enough for the body to keep," ventured Timothy Timberlake, hiding his burning curiosity so obstinately that

his round eyes actually looked glazed and fish-like.

Grip-sack Sid started slightly, then just the shadow of a smile flitted across his face, leaving it graver, more earnest than before.

"You both have at least an idea as to what brought us to Capital City," he said, his tones barely loud enough for their keen ears to catch and interpret aright. "Having that knowledge, you ought to know that we can't afford to branch off on side issues, or make ourselves too prominent aside from the Magic Salve racket."

"We simply followed your lead, boss," quietly said Mitchell.

"I know; so far you did just right; and if I was at liberty to act as my natural impulses urge, we'd be ahead of that howling mob, trying to save a poor devil from the rope!" flashed Silver-tongued Sid, once more letting a glimpse of his true nature peep from under that cold, wary mask.

"It'd be all try and no git thar!" softly murmured Timberlake, his lips pursing up for a whistle, until his mouth looked like nothing more than a wormhole in a wrinkled apple.

"You'd both back me up, I know, even if the chances were still more slender; but can we afford to chip in just now?"

"It's your decision, Mr. Harper."

"Then I say no!" his steel-blue eyes glowing sternly. "If that howling pack does lynch Jonah Sparrow, 'twill be a murder even more foul than the crime that brought us here in such a hurry. I felt it from the first break; I almost know it, now!"

"Hard lines on him, but—" with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Just how hard—come inside the shack and judge for yourselves, gentlemen," curtly uttered the grip-sack fakir, turning to enter the room where lay Daniel Bryson.

He knelt beside the miner, gently slipping a hand over the region of his heart, bending his ear until it touched the blood-soaked shirt.

"I was almost sure—now I know it!" he uttered, drawing back with a strange glow in his eyes as they passed from one face to the other. "This isn't murder, because he still lives!"

Despite the fact that all had led toward this very point, both Mitchell and Timberlake started and changed countenance at this positive announcement. If the miner was not dead—

"Why didn't I declare as much to those hot-heads?" slowly asked Harper, answered their unspoken wonder. "First, because I was far from certain I wasn't cheating myself. Next—well, would a simple spark of life like this have held those bloodthirsty devils in check?"

"They couldn't well hang a man for murder when no murder had been committed—surely!"

"Not if they were acting simply as the tools of justice, but suppose their point lay deeper? Suppose the real mark was, not this poor fellow, but one whom they had to strike at after a roundabout fashion? Suppose—"

A feeble, shivering gasp came from the lips of the prostrate figure, and instantly breaking off his speech, Grip-sack Sid set about ministering to the sufferer, ably seconded by his two aides.

Once more the wonderful grip-sack came into play, for there was still a portion left in the brandy flask. With difficulty those tightly-clinched teeth were parted sufficiently to permit a few drops to enter and trickle down Daniel Bryson's throat.

With a rapidity and deftness that spoke of considerable practice, Silver-tongued Sid formed bandages to cover the ugly wounds, guarding against any fresh burst of bleeding, though one would have thought his poor veins had already been drained dry.

Gently, steadily, so deftly that the action would hardly have disturbed a lightly-dozing infant, the three men lifted the miner upon his pallet. And once more the man of the Magic Salve appealed to his brandy flask.

Drop by drop at first, then gradually increasing the doses, all the while keeping a sensitive finger on his pulse, keenly watching each change in that corpse-like face.

"If he could only tell the story!" he muttered, frowning darkly in his anxious perplexity.

"Would it come in time, think?" ventured Mitchell with an involuntary glance toward the quarter whither the howling mob had gone.

"For us, if not for poor Sparrow!"

Mitchell shrugged his shoulders, interchanging a glance with his slender mate.

"You think that would be mighty poor consolation!" asked Grip-sack Sid, with a short, hard laugh. "Right—for Sparrow! But I was thinking of our own particular game. Do you know, I feel morally certain that all this is but part of their game?"

"Not—Holy smoke!"

"No names—button up!" frowned Grip-sack Sid, with an imperious wave of his hand that stifled the words leaping to their lips.

Just then Daniel Bryson gave a spasmotic start, sharply moving his right arm, a gasping moan parting his lips. His heavy eyes opened and he tried to lift his head.

"Who struck you, man?" eagerly asked Harper, bending over until his ear almost touched those blanched lips.

Another sound—what seemed to be an attempt at speech: but then, with a faint shiver the lids closed and the wounded miner lay still and motionless.

For a brief space even Grip-sack Sid felt that this was the end: that death had come to end the poor fellow's sufferings. But then he felt the pulse come back, beating more regularly, though so faintly. And now Bryson was breathing like one sleeping.

For a moment he sat beside the pallet, his own face pale and deeply lined. Neither of his men ventured to disturb his thoughts, for they could see how strong, how troubled they were.

Then he arose, shaking his compact figure, drawing a long breath.

"That was the one chance I waited for, but it's gone, and for good, I reckon," he said, speaking rapidly, evenly. "Now nothing remains but to—Ha!"

"Don't—what have—pardner!"

The Grip-sack Sharp turned like a flash to the pallet, where the sorely wounded man was feebly muttering, though only his whitened lips moved, all the rest seeming terribly corpse-like.

"Who hurt you, Dan Bryson?" he asked again, his eyes glowing vividly, his strong features working with intense eagerness. "Was it Mat Singrey, your pard? Was it Jonah Sparrow?"

"Don't—Maggie—"

Barely audible were the words. A slight, shrinking movement, then once more deathlike stillness.

Time and again did Grip-sack Sid endeavor to rouse the wounded miner to consciousness, hoping against hope, repeating the names of his injured partner, of Sparrow, of still others; but all was in vain.

Baffled, bitterly disappointed, he glanced at the face of his watch, springing to his feet in dismay at the swift passage of time.

"Look after him the best you know how, mates," he hurriedly uttered as he touched Mitchell on an arm and left the cabin, followed by the man. "Note down every word that passes his lips, but don't try to make him talk again. It's too late already, I'm afraid!"

"You're going to try—"

"To save Jonah Sparrow if it lies in the wood—yes! No, I don't need you. Stay here. Keep any and all persons out of the cabin, if you have to use lead and steel to do it! Wait until you hear from me, or until I can come back."

Mitchell looked as though he would like still plainer instructions, or to ask some questions, but Grip-sack Sid waited no longer.

"He'll do it if mortal man can!" grimly nodded Mitchell, watching that rapidly moving figure until it was lost to sight amidst the rocks and bushes.

"I've got to—got to!" at the same moment Sidney Harper was muttering, his face stern-set, his eyes glittering like orbs of polished steel. "Yet—what a glorious weapon it would be to hold in reserve, if all I surmise is true!"

Almost from the very first he had doubted Matthew Singrey, though he had little better than pure instinct to back up his suspicions.

The man had acted well; too well, he told himself, with his brows contracting harshly. From start to finish he had turned the just rage of the mob in one direction, but in his thirst for the blood of Jonah Sparrow, he had permitted himself to go too far.

"If all was straight, would he have followed us up, to check our rush to the cabin?" Sidney Harper asked himself while pressing swiftly on to reach the point where the trails divided. "If he was so badly hurt as he tried to make out, he couldn't have done that; if telling the simple facts, he wouldn't have even thought of it. For vengeance would be just as sure, even if delayed an hour or two."

And yet—how could Mat Singrey be playing in with those other criminals? Until this day they had given no signs that they had aught in common. And why should those others seek the death of Jonah Sparrow, when all their interests demanded that they keep quiet and avoid everything that could direct close attention their way?

"It's all a muddle, but I'm going by instinct. And that tells me—Ha!" breaking off abruptly and bending an ear as a significant sound, or series of sounds, came to his hearing on the favoring breeze.

The distance was too great for him to distinguish words, but he knew that only human voices, shrilly lifted, could make such an echo.

"They're running him up a tree!" he grated, springing forward at the top of his speed, covering ground more rapidly than a horse could have done over that rough trail.

Then—he stopped short, with a fierce oath.

Ahead and below, stood a tall pine tree. Under its branches were gathered scores of rough-clad men. And even as he gazed, he saw a human figure slowly drawn upward, the lynchers' noose about his neck.

CHAPTER XII.

THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE.

BRUISED and bleeding, his eyes almost swollen by that knock-down blow from the iron fist of the herculean miner, John Walkinshaw proudly

led the lynchers as they moved away from the lone cabin where their victim had been captured.

He carried in his hands the noosed lariat which he had once flung about the neck of the already doomed miner. If he had felt less sure of his game, he might have repeated the effort, despite the stern reproof given him by Cap Dawson, who now walked by the side of Jonah Sparrow.

The giant miner seemed dazed, more like one in a dream than a man who saw the shadow of a shameful death hanging over his head.

At times he would stare about him with a gleam of puzzled anger, changing to mild reproof as his captors would hustle him rudely onward.

"Don't—what have I done, gents? You're crowding—you'll frighten my little—I thought she was here!" as he gazed bewilderedly about him, trying to lift a hand to brush the mists from before his eyes.

As he found himself unable to do this, he paused abruptly, running his eyes downward over his person, staring at the plaited leather lasso that wound about him like the coils of a snake.

And as he was once more roughly crowded on, the puzzled look grew deeper in his mild blue eyes.

Cap Dawson watched him closely, the troubled look growing stronger on his own face, and before quarter of that death-trip had been made, he dropped away from the side of the big fellow.

Not through dislike or distrust, but to gather such among the mob as he had hopes he might win over to his side in the struggle which, even though he had to stand alone in his brave defense of this man, he knew could not long be delayed.

"Watch him—try to read his face!" he whispered earnestly in each chosen ear. "Is that the face of a man fresh from a most brutal murder? No sir! It's the face of a poor drunken devil, nobody's enemy but his own!"

His efforts were not altogether in vain, though his converts were lamentably few. He tried to hope, for those few were known as the most reputable and honest residents of Capital City.

"Stick to the line I mark out," he would add, whenever he saw signs of weakening or growing doubt. "Pull together and we're bound to get there in the end! I don't ask the liberty of a criminal, only a square chance for a man to prove his innocence!"

John Walkinshaw, tacitly acknowledged as the leader of the rougher element, could hardly have escaped seeing something of this, but if so, he felt secure in his backing and made no effort to counteract the influence of Dawson.

The tall pine-tree was reached, and the mass came to a halt under its spreading branches. From one stout bough, running out almost horizontally, several fragments of rope still swayed in the breeze, grim relics of a troubled past.

If Jonah Sparrow was fated to hang, he would not be the first human fruit this "Rogue Apple-tree" had borne!

"Cl'ar the track!" cried Walkinshaw, swinging the ready coiled lasso about his head and making an ineffectual cast at the limb above.

"Ole man's drunk ag'in!" howled one of his mates, with a horse-laugh at the clumsy exhibition.

"Tain't bad whisky—he hain't got used to them purty specs as Ole Man Sparrow hitched onto the two eyes o' him!"

"Never you mind the eyes o' me," laughed Walkinshaw, recoiling his lariat for a second cast. "They'll be well ag'in when they'm looked at Ole Man Sparrow kickin' at wind, up yender!"

He started to whirl the rope, but it was caught and jerked out of his hands by Cap Dawson, who tossed it far behind him, undauntedly facing the enraged and startled ruffian.

"It's trying before hanging, John Walkinshaw, and—You cur!" his tall, soldierly figure drawing proudly erect as he faced the ugly weapon flashed forth by the bully.

"I'll blow ye clean to blazes!" harshly growled Walkinshaw, but halting with pistol half brought to a level, warned by the growing sounds from almost every quarter.

"Shoot, you coward!" coldly cried the veteran, opening his bosom as though to invite the lead. "You dare not! I've faced uglier bummers and camp-sneaks than you dare be, before to-day. Shoot—and before the smoke is clear of that muzzle, you'll climb this tree with your neck in your own noose!"

"I don't—you're stickin' up fer a bloody murderer!"

"Prove him such, and I'll lend a willing hand to the rope that sends him to his last reward, but until you do bring such proof—"

" Didn't we find it right in his own shack—say?"

Walkinshaw brightened up, Dawson frowned as a grim chorus broke out in the crowd at this hard hit. And when the burly ruffian tore the marked money-bags from his bosom, where he had hidden them, there came a fierce surge that almost carried the veteran off his feet.

Even then he did not quail, calling aloud to his friends and even daring so much as to strike

down an evil-visaged fellow who clung to the throat of the bound and helpless prisoner like a wildcat.

"Close in—shoulder to shoulder, all ye who claim to be white!" he cried, battles, panting, but still undaunted in his honest wish for pure justice.

"Down 'em, lads!" howled Walkinshaw, savagely. "They're tryin' to cheat the rope by runnin' off the p'izen critter as butchered pore Dan Bryson!"

"He lies, men of Capital!" thundered Dawson. "All I ask for Sparrow is a fair shake. You ought to know me—I carry my record on my body—honest wounds received in open war—and he lies who dare even hint that I would save a criminal from paying the just penalty of his misdeeds."

"Then shut up an' cl'ar the way fer—"

"Murderers even viler than you try to make him out?" cut in the old soldier, with a forced laugh. "Unless you're afraid he'll mix you up in the scrape, button up yourself and give the man a chance to show his innocence, if he be honest!"

"Good enough! Cap's right! We can hang him in decent order if he deserves hanging!"

"That's all I ask," cried Dawson, catching at the opening and making the best of it. "If he can't prove his innocence to the satisfaction of all, I'll give way and say not another word."

"That's white—that's honest enough for a hog!" cried another prominent citizen, while still a third chimed in, begging his fellow-citizens to proceed with order and decency.

"You don't want to plaster shame all over our noble city, and I know it! You don't want every mining-camp in the foot-hills pointing the finger of contempt at us!"

John Walkinshaw attempted to stem the turning tide, but he was rudely hustled by some of the very men who had been foremost in following his lead but a few minutes earlier, and though his thirst for the prisoner's blood was even greater now than at first, he dared not persist when pistols and knives were beginning to flourish uncomfortably close to his own precious person.

"All right, ef it's a fa'r shake ye want an' nothin' wuss," he growled, surlily. "I ain't holdin' out ag'inst that. I reckoned it was tryin' fer to run the critter off an' lettin' pore Dan Bryson go to his bloody grave onpaid fer."

Cap Dawson had gained his point, but he could not feel very exultant. Even while fighting, he felt that his cause was a vain one, but he put the best possible face upon it, and when one of his supporters nominated him to act as Judge Lynch, he promptly accepted.

John Walkinshaw scowled blackly, but he dared not object. All Capital City knew that an honest, whiter, more capable man never lived than the old soldier. And even those who felt hardest toward the accused, outside of the bully with the blackened eyes, felt fully assured that if proven guilty, Jonah Sparrow would surely meet his just dues.

There was little time cut to waste in arranging the preliminaries for that al fresco trial. With the judge elected, the prisoner before him, there was little else to do save bring forward the evidence. For all the others there assembled were to be the jury.

Through all this wild turmoil, Jonah Sparrow had stood, hustled here and there, back and forth, without word or protest. Through it all he looked and acted like a man suffering from some stupefying drug, or else an idiotic being without wits enough to realize his peril.

And when John Walkinshaw, volunteering as the first witness, told how Matthew Singrey brought the terrible tidings to town, charging the prisoner with robbery and murder most foul, Jonah Sparrow stared stupidly at him, seemingly unable to comprehend a word of it all.

"An' thar he stan's, feller-citizens!" cried Walkinshaw, pointing at the giant, "playin' stupid! Shell he come sech a measly game o' roots onto such a comp'ny like this? Shell he—"

"Step down, if you hev no further evidence to offer, sir!" sternly cried Judge Lynch.

"But I hev!" and he swung aloft the marked money-bags where all could see them. "Didn't we find these hid into his own cabin? An' hain't this one fresh marked with the life blood o' pore Dan Bryson?"

"Und dhoze odder vons—dot vhas mine!" pantingly cried the voice of tall Fritz Zimmer, rushing up, his face marked with half-dried blood. "He steals mein gelt! He kills mein frau—mein swel kinder! I schwear dhoze dings py him! I gry oudt—hang dhoze easil dogs!"

Like a human catapult the German, crazed by his wrongs, forced his way through the crowd and laid violent hands upon the giant. But even then, with the mob howling and yelling, cursing and struggling, nearly every item of the whole sum longing to have a part in his death, Jonah Sparrow seemed incapable of realizing his situation.

"Don't—you crowd—where's my little girly?" he muttered, staring dizzily about him. "If you've dared to do hurt to her—"

Although he must have known that all was lost, Cap Dawson still fought for justice, still

tried to win for that miserable wretch a fair chance for his life.

But he was all alone, now. Convinced by the proofs brought forward that the accused was guilty, all others had abandoned him to his fate.

"Keep your word, Cap Dawson!" cried Walkinshaw, rope once more in hand, his brutish face lit up with unholly triumph. "Ef ye don't—waal, they's room an' rope a-plenty fer to make two hangin's 'stead o' jest one! Eh, mates?"

"Bet your sweet life, Walkin' John!"

"Come off yer peerch, Cap!"

"Choke Dutchy off, or we'll hev a dead man fer to haul up!"

Dawson cried out in desperation, even going so far in his madness as to snatch a revolver from the belt of a man near him. But then his best friends crowded around him, forcing him away from the spot, holding him helpless for his own good.

Walkinshaw flung the lasso over the limb, catching the noosed end as it came down, laughing ferociously as he fitted the loop about the neck of the accused as strong hands forced him forward.

"Ketch holt, mates!" he cried, fastening his own grip on the doomed miner. "Take a long pull, a strong pull, an' a pull all in a heap! All she lacks o' bein' a perfect success, is pore Mat Singrey fer to see his bloody 'sassin hauled up to kick the wind crazy!"

He gave the word, and a score of ready hands tugged away at the rope, slowly lifting Jonah Sparrow from his feet, the rope slipping hardly over the rough bark of the limb.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FORLORN HOPE.

THE voice of Fritz Zimmer rung out cheerily, and every note contained what was meant for encouragement; but a more unwelcome sound could hardly have come to either of the young people within the lone cabin, just then.

At first Retta Sparrow acted like one in a half-sleep, obeying, but without fully understanding why she did, or why such a service should be expected at her hands.

But the hasty, eager words of her lover quickly drove away those dull mists, and she knew he was still trying to save her father.

Perhaps it was just as well for Roger that the knife she first caught up was dull—stepping over his bound form and snatching it up from the little table, still partly spread for the breakfast Jonah Sparrow was fated never to eat!—for in her dizzy excitement the blade was touching his flesh quite as often as the stout rope which held him helpless.

Roger hardly noticed this, so great was his desire to be with all limbs at liberty before the stalwart German could return from the spring, and to that end he directed her work mainly to the upper turns of the tough lariat, twisting one hand free as soon as possible, taking the knife from her hand and completing the work himself.

"Back—to your room, Retta!" he panted, scrambling to his feet, but dropping the case-knife as he had to catch at the door-casing to keep from falling.

The tightly drawn rope had impeded the circulation of blood so much that he had only partial use of his limbs.

"Comen, leedle laty!"

"Not yet—another minute!" gasped, almost groaned the young miner, dizzy and unmanned for the instant by that exquisite pain caused by the leaping, stinging, burning blood.

"Here!" and Retta Sparrow thrust a revolver into his trembling hand. "Shoot—kill—for dear father!"

Roger Glynn recoiled, brushing a hand across his eyes as he stared at the speaker. He had not recognized her voice. He could hardly recognize her face, so terribly was it changed by her wild emotions.

He took the pistol and turned toward the front door, through which came distinctly the echo of hurrying footsteps; but as his eyes fell upon a stick of firewood lying by the open door, kicked there by some of the searching party to keep the door from swinging shut, the pistol changed hands and he caught up the club instead.

Wholly unsuspecting what a change had been wrought during the few moments of his absence, Fritz Zimmer came hurrying into the cabin with a pail of water fresh from the spring, repeating:

"Comen, leedle laty! Comen—mein Gott!"

Roger Glynn struck swift and sure, bringing that club down upon the head of the stalwart guard, knowing that in his present weakened condition he would stand little show in a hand-to-hand struggle, yet afraid to put forth his entire strength lest he do murder.

Either this fear, or the fact that Zimmer possessed a head of uncommon toughness, prevented that stroke from being conclusive, though the pail of water dropped to the floor and the guard went staggering across the room, saved from falling only by striking the rear wall with his blindly-groping hands.

"Don't—Katrina—" the poor fellow gasped,

blindly, even as the young miner followed him up with billet lifted for another blow.

That name recalled the pathetic recital which he had so recently listened to, and the club dropped from Glynn's hand. He could not strike again, and he almost hated himself as he sprung upon the half-stunned guard, twisting him aside, kicking both feet from under his body, falling heavily on top of him.

"The rope, Retta!" he panted, hurriedly, closing both hands about Zimmer's throat, choking down his spasmodic struggles.

The poor girl was shrinking, shivering, looking like one terrified nearly out of her senses, yet wholly unable to flee or to avert her eyes from those struggling men. It was for her father's life—it was her lover who—

"Yes—thank Heaven, Roger!" she panted, catching up the severed lariat and springing to the side of her lover.

Zimmer still struggled, but it was an aimless resistance. That heavy blow had scattered his physical powers, leaving him little better than a child in the grip of the muscular young miner.

With Retta's aid, Roger quickly bound his captive, rising to his feet with a long breath of intense relief.

That feeling was very short-lived, and as the whole prospect seemed to rise up before his eyes, Roger Glynn shrank back appalled.

Retta saw this—saw him reel, heard him groan, and instantly her loving fears were awakened.

"You are hurt, love!" she quavered, touching his arm and looking into his pale face through gathering tears that almost blinded her.

"No—but I fear I've killed this poor fellow!"

"He was keeping us from father—he deserves death a thousand times over!" impetuously cried the maiden, in a voice and with a look such as he had never thought her capable of. "Father—where did they take him to? What will they do to him? Oh, Roger!" with face hidden in his bosom, her figure shivering violently as he lent her support. "Take me to him—take me to poor old daddy!"

"He vhas go hang—he vhas go deadt alreayt!"

Fritz Zimmer spoke, dizzily exultant even as he feebly, vainly strove to rise, as yet not realizing his complete overthrow.

Retta caught his words, and lifted her head with a start. She looked into the white face of her lover, as though to see there the assurance that no truth lurked in that cruel speech. Only to sink limply in the young miner's strong arms.

Taken by surprise, Roger Glynn had been unable to school his face, and in it Retta Sparrow recognized the terrible truth.

"He may not—he is not harmed, dear girl. I'll go and bring him back to your arms, or I'll—"

The girl rallied, dashing the blinding tears from her eyes, trying to free herself from his embrace sufficiently to spring through the front door as she huskily murmured:

"Haste—oh, hasten! If there be even the shadow of a chance, we must make the most of it! Father—spare him—he's all I have left to me now!"

Poor Roger Glynn!

He had heard enough while lying bound and half-stunned by those cruel blows, to feel that the tragedy, so far as Jonah Sparrow was concerned, had come to an ending long before this moment.

He had understood those deep, deadly cries for human blood. He had heard the lynchers speak of Rogue Apple-tree, and had caught a glimpse of Jonah Sparrow with a rope noosed around his neck as the mob closed in about him.

Recalling all this, he had not even the shadow of a hope that he could do ought to save her father from death: yet Retta was urging him to hasten with her to—what?

"She must not—the sight would drive her mad, or strike her dead!" he mentally groaned, racking his bewildered brain for some plausible excuse for leaving her at the cabin to await his return.

He fancied he saw this, in the renewed efforts of Fritz Zimmer to regain his footing, cursing hotly in his native tongue as he realized what hampered his limbs.

"You must—If he should get loose and beat us there, Retta, he might add to your father's danger," he eagerly said, catching at the chance for lack of a better. "Stay you here and guard him while I go bring back word—while I fetch—"

With a panting sob, the maiden broke away from his restraining hand, leaving the cabin and running down the trail leading toward town.

The knot was cut, now, and only pausing to take the weapons from Zimmer's belt, Roger Glynn hastened after his sweetheart.

The half-crazed girl sped on over the rough trail until her breath failed her, and so rapidly that until her steps began to falter and grow unsteady, Roger was unable to overtake her. She stumbled and fell, giving a sobbing cry of pain and despair, just as his hands were reaching out to support her.

Her head struck with considerable force against a rock, and there was seeming death in

her face as Roger caught her loved form up in his arms, covering her pale brow with passionate kisses, wiping the trickle of blood away with his lips.

For those first few moments the poor fellow was half distracted, really believing Retta dead, and through his misery he caught himself thinking that, for her sake, perhaps it was just as well.

He knew how passionately she loved Jonah Sparrow. The twain had been more like mother and son than father and daughter, the giant was so simple and childlike in many respects, so weak amid all his magnificent strength.

"It would be worse than death to her, if those devils have really hung him up!"

But then he saw that Retta was only stunned by her fall, and lacking better means of restoring her senses, Roger lifted her tall, slender figure in his arms, manfully staggering with his precious burden over the broken ground, heading for the little stream of water which he recalled as flowing not many rods away from the trail.

More than once he was obliged to pause to catch breath, and by the time the water-side was reached, Retta opened her eyes with a faint sigh, gazing dimly, dreamily around.

"Dear baby!" she murmured, with a faint smile lighting up her pale countenance briefly. "I had such a terrible dream! I thought—Merciful God!"

The dread truth flashed upon her poor brain as her gaze fell upon the face of her lover, marked with blood and bearing scratches and bruises received during his fight with Terry Mack.

That shock again deprived her of her senses, and Roger Glynn found use for the sparkling water, after all.

"And yet—I'm a fool for trying to restore her!" he groaned, wretched beyond description as he remembered to what bitter agony she must awaken to. "I'd be more merciful were I to cut her sweet throat or put a bullet through her brain!"

While thus occupied he caught the sound of hurried footsteps, and turning, saw Fritz Zimmer rushing at full speed along the trail which led to Capital City. He mechanically plucked a revolver from his belt, but lowered the weapon before he could catch a bead on that tall form.

"Let him go—it's all over, long before this time!" he muttered with a frown and a shiver.

Unconsciously he had spoken aloud, and the sound of his voice did more to rouse Retta Sparrow than all his efforts. And as ill-luck would have it, the first thing her gaze rested on was the stalwart figure of the German, hastening toward the hangman's tree.

With a wailing cry the maiden sprung to her feet, staggering forward, fighting desperately against his restraining grasp. She accused him of being in the terrible plot to rob her of her father, and though he knew she was distracted, the poor fellow was cut to the very heart.

He could not keep her back without the use of violence, and even to spare her fresh pain, he could not bring himself to that. Nor did he dare tell her why he was so anxious to keep her from gaining the rise not many rods ahead of their present position; dared not say that from its crest they would be gazing down upon the Rogue Apple-tree.

With feverish strength Retta pressed on, resisting his entreaties to rest, to wait, anything rather than kill herself needlessly. And then she went far enough to catch sight of—Merciful heavens!

One agonized stare. One wailing shriek. Then she sank lifelessly into the arms of her tortured lover.

CHAPTER XIV.

BY THE SKIN OF HIS TEETH.

RETTA SPARROW had seen what all that howling mob was witnessing; what had drawn a fierce oath from the lips of Silver-tongued Sid; the form of Jonah Sparrow being slowly hauled up toward the horizontal bough by a choking noose closely hugging his throat!

But the herculean miner was not to die then and there, for before his suffocation was severe enough to cause his writhings to violently agitate the lariat, a pistol-shot stung forth, and the partly severed rope gave way beneath his great weight, permitting him to drop those few feet to the ground.

"Steady, gentlemen!" cried a clear, stern voice, which nearly every one present had no difficulty in recognizing. "I've just eleven more chips of the same sort, and each one calls for a life if I'm forced to play them!"

"The boss! Dave Hudson!" spluttered John Walkinshaw, shrinking back with a face that turned a sickly yellow.

"He's done bloody murder!"

"He was ketched red-handed!"

"Yank him up—an' balance him 'ith the sport, ef be chips in ag'in so mighty brash!"

"Steady—as you were!" rang out that voice, and the speaker brought two armed hands to a level, his fine eyes flashing over the plated tubes as their muzzles moved from side to side, seeming to cover each man in turn. "You're play-

ing murder yourselves! This man is innocent, and I can prove it!"

"Thank Heaven for that!" cried Cap Dawson, breaking away from the arms that held him back. "I'm with you, Dave Hudson!"

"And so will all white men be. Shoulder to shoulder, honest men! And I'll kill the first to lay a finger on Jonah Sparrow!"

There came an instinctive division. A few men moved toward the bold speaker. Many others shrank instinctively away, even while furtively feeling for their weapons.

They outnumbered the first party, ten to one, and only by a hair's breadth could the deadly work they had begun. If John Walkinshaw had lifted his voice once more in favor of hanging, Jonah Sparrow would surely have gone up into the air, to stay there until death claimed him for its prey.

David Hudson seemed to realize as much, for he sternly cried:

"Bridle your tongue, Walking John! I've got you lined, and you know I couldn't miss your bigness if I were to try. Fall back—no hanging until the whole evidence is in!"

"That's all we ask—all we're fighting for!" chimed in Cap Dawson, hoping to turn the scale their way. "All we want is a square deal. All we ask is to let our what can be said in favor of the accused."

"And we'll carry our point, or Capital City will go short on funeral crap before sunset," grimly laughed the tall gambler.

"But if he was guilty?"

"Mein Gott in himmel!" spluttered Fritz Zimmer, crowding toward the sport who took such a bold stand in defense of the giant. "Dond't he vhas pin broofed zo already?"

David Hudson took one great stride forward, swiftly reversing his heavy revolver and striking one blow; a blow that felled the stalwart German as the ox drops beneath the ax of the butcher.

"America for Americans, and Capital City for white men!" cried the gambler, once more with weapons menacing the swaying crowd. "Only thugs and cowards will stretch the neck of a man without first proving him fit for the rope. And I swear to you, one and all, that Jonah Sparrow is as innocent as I am!"

"And what better assurance do you ask for than that same?" cried the mellow voice of Silver-tongued Sid, pushing up to the side of David Hudson and his slowly-increasing backing. "Fair play is a jewel, and right here you have its prophet!"

He tapped the tall gambler on a shoulder, laughingly adding:

"And you can call me its loss, if the little joke will help to put you in better humor!"

John Walkinshaw pushed forward, but with empty hand uplifted, palm to the front as a flag of truce. And though his bruised face looked repulsive enough, his words were far more agreeable.

"We don't ax to hang him ef he don't deserve it, boss. Ef you say he never done the dirty trick, why—"

"I do say it, and I stand ready to prove his complete innocence to the satisfaction of every fair-minded man on the grounds!" was the crisp response.

"Then—fall in, mates!" said Walkinshaw, with a wave of his hairy paw. "'Tain't murder we're bent on, but ketchin' the murderer!"

His conversion brought over a few of the rougher element, but the opposition was still by far the most numerous, and all were not so easy to convince of their mistake.

Ugly mutterings were heard, and from the thickest mass came a coarse, evil voice:

"Stash the chatter! Run the bloody butcher up, an' send Dave Hudson to keep him comp'ny!"

The tall gambler did not flinch, though probably no other man in all that crowd more fully realized the peril that menaced him. He even took a step in advance as he called out:

"Only a cur hides his face while wagging his tongue to so bold a tune. Shove the coward forward, some of you, and let's have a fair look at the one who talks so glibly of hanging his betters!"

There was a swaying of the mass, but it only served to more completely screen the offender. Clearly that portion of the crowd was in favor of hanging the accused first, then—if at all—listening to the evidence in his favor.

"All eyes open, pard!" muttered Silver-tongued Sid, his lips hardly moving as he thus warned David Hudson. "They're making ready for a rush. They count on pinching Sparrow before—now!"

Jonah Sparrow had fallen at full length when the rope was cut, for his limbs were unnerved for the moment, but while that wordy dispute was taking place, he managed to regain his footing, despite his arms being pinioned behind his back.

He stood beneath the hangman's limb, the noose dangling from his neck. He stared bewilderedly around upon those passion-inflamed faces, seemingly listening to all that was said, but if he really comprehended aught, his face did not show as much.

Silver-tongued Sid, divining the purpose of

the opposition, sprung forward and gained the side of the bound giant, one hand on his arm, the other holding a cocked revolver, waving back the roughs as he cried:

"Fair play's all we ask, gentlemen, and fair play goes if we have to flood this section with be-lud! So—close in, white men!"

David Hudson, Cap Dawson, John Walkinshaw, with half a score other men came to the rescue, closing in around the stupefied giant, their hands armed with ugly frowning pistols.

"Rush 'em!" howled that evil voice, even now without its owner betraying himself to those brave eyes on watch. "They're trying to run the bloody butcher off!"

"You lie!" boldly cried Silver-tongued Sid.

"We're only guarding against foul play," earnestly added Dawson. "Don't force us to shoot—don't crowd us into shedding human blood; when all we ask for is an honest trial for the man charged with these awful crimes!"

"Hasn't he been tried and found guilty, judge?" demanded one of the front rank in opposition.

"You're white and decent, if playing on the wrong side," said David Hudson, with a grim nod of approval. "If the whole gang was like you, we'd mighty quick get down to pay-dirt."

"Talk's cheap," was the gruff retort. "What we ask for is action on behalf of outraged justice."

"Precisely what we're splitting our throats in quest of," laughed the grip-sack fakir. "We're gazing at the same signboard, but you only see the black side, while ours is white as undrilled snow!"

"Give the poor fellow a chance to speak up for his side," urged Dawson, earnestly, his gray beard fairly wet with perspiration, his voice sounding hoarse and fatigued, but with eyes as undaunted as at first. "You're strong enough to crush us down like—"

"But we'll sink our teeth mighty deep, first!" nodded Hudson.

"You're strong enough to hang Sparrow, if he fails to clear himself to your perfect satisfaction; then why run the risk of doing murder even more foul than that with which he stands charged?"

"Hear! Hear!" cried Grip-sack Sid, in loud approval.

"It's Gospel truth, mates," chimed in Walkinshaw, earnestly, no less stout defender now than he had been assailant before. "You know I was just as hot fer to repeal the big critter as the best o' ye all, on'y a weenty bit ago, but now—"

"What figger did Dave Hudson wink at ye afore—"

It was the owner of that evil voice, but this time he exposed himself to the watchful eye of the tall gambler, and before he could complete that malicious sentence, Hudson's revolver exploded, and with a shrill screech of agony, the wizzen rascal reeled back with a bullet-shattered arm.

"Next shot will ring the bell!" sternly cried the sharp-shooter. "No pitiful tin-horn gambler can fling a dirty slur in my teeth without feeling them meet through the flesh. Who follows him?"

Silver-tongued Sid felt his heart leap into his throat as that shot rang forth, for, with others of the defenders, he felt that it surely must precipitate a fight to the very death. But instead of that, the severe punishment measured out to one of their number, seemed to cow the opposition.

Some ugly mutterings were heard, but the worst was over, so far as those who stood up for Jonah Sparrow was concerned, and the man whom Hudson had complimented on his honesty, offered a compromise.

"If you can't prove him innocent, will you give way and let him suffer the penalty due a thief and murderer?"

"Of course I will," was the instant response. "We want to aid justice, not cheat it by hanging the wrong man while the real criminal goes scot-free."

With the first backward step taken, the rest came naturally enough.

Cap Dawson was again installed as judge, the accused was held under guard by one armed man from each side; Silver-tongued Sid managing to obtain that unenviable position for his party, while the one who had consented to a re-opening of the case, Henry Johnson by name, represented the opposition.

David Hudson stood forward as the first witness for the accused, but instead of waiting to be questioned, he asked the judge:

"At about what hour did Matthew Singrey place this robbery and attempted murder, judge?"

"Last night. He could not tell the exact hour, but it must have happened sometime after midnight and before day dawn."

At that moment came a startling interruption. A wild scream gave the alarm, and as all eyes turned in that direction, Retta Sparrow was seen flying swiftly down the trail toward the tree, her arms extended, her pale face the picture of agonized fear and pleading.

After her ran Roger Glynn, but the maiden's eyes had caught sight of her father, his giant

form towering above his surroundings, and the wind itself could hardly have outstripped the girl, then.

"Mercy—spare him!" she wailed, bursting through the crowd as it gave way before her, slinging her arms about the prisoner's neck.

"Of course you will, men of Capital City!" shouted David Hudson, his handsome face all aglow as he added: "He is innocent—I swear it! He could not have committed that foul crime, for he never left his house from sundown last night, to daybreak this morning!"

"Who says so?" called out a doubting voice from the other side.

"I say so! I passed the entire night beneath his roof!"

CHAPTER XV.

CASTING OIL ON TROUBLED WATERS.

WHATEVER the crowd may have expected in the way of evidence, it certainly was not this bold yet cool statement, and as they began to realize what it meant, if admitted correct, it almost took their breath away.

Honest Cap Dawson was overjoyed, and plainly showed as much in his face and voice as he said:

"You make this statement, understanding, of course, that you are on oath, Mr. Hudson?"

"Have you a Bible handy, judge?"

"Good Lawd!" spluttered some one from the crowd, in tones of such undisguised amazement that it produced a universal laugh.

Judge Lynch flushed a bit, lifting a hand to command order and silence in his court. And David Hudson gravely added:

"Lacking that, sir, I pledge you my word of honor. I spent all of last night under the roof-tree of Jonah Sparrow's home."

Among all who heard, perhaps Roger Glynn felt the strongest emotions, though he fought hard to school his features as his honest eyes moved from the handsome face of the witness to that of the maiden whom he loved with all his soul.

He knew that Jonah Sparrow had not spent all the past night at home; he knew that he had been absent from home through all those hours; that Retta had not seen him since noon of the day before, until he came home that very forenoon.

He saw David Hudson glance to where the maiden stood, still clinging to her bewildered father, and heard him slowly, distinctly say:

"If you doubt my word, or if it needs corroborative evidence, no doubt Miss Sparrow will be willing to give it, judge."

Perhaps if Cap Dawson had known all, he might not have insisted, but as he would have perished before testifying falsely, even under informal conditions such as these, he never for a moment doubted the perfect truth of what he now heard. And resolved to leave not even the shadow of a doubt to trouble the men of Capital City, he spoke out:

"You have heard the evidence given by Mr. Hudson, Miss Sparrow? Will you kindly bear him out in his statement?"

Retta started, glancing with frightened eyes from face to face, her lips quivering, her face flushing hotly as she caught the steady gaze of her lover.

"Don't—they sha'n't do ye hurt, little birdy!" muttered Jonah Sparrow. "I don't see—we'll go home, Retta. It's too big a crowd," with a frown gathering on his face as he looked around. "I don't like it. I don't—what's the matter with my hands?"

"Did you not catch my words, Miss Sparrow?" gravely, anxiously asked the judge, fearing an unfortunate outbreak on the part of the prisoner. "For your father's sake, speak out and fear nothing!"

Roger Glynn held his breath as he leaned forward to listen, but he was not kept much longer in suspense, for Retta spoke in clear unsheathed tones:

"I swear that it is true; Mr. Hudson stopped all night at our house. Father did not leave it between sun and sun."

For a brief space there was complete silence as, her words spoken, Retta Sparrow hid her face in the broad bosom of her father, shivering all over as though afflicted with an ague. Then a single voice broke out with:

"Let Ole Man Sparrow tell his story. Let him back 'em both up, ef he kin!"

"I protest, your Honor!" cried Silver-tongued Sid, pressing forward and commanding attention by his earnestness. "And if anybody kicks because I'm not a regularly called witness, just set me down as Jonah Sparrow's lawyer!"

"Look at my noble client, gentlemen of the jury! And you, your Honor! Look into his manly countenance, and read your answer there. Look into those eyes, and unless ye are every one blind as a mole and stupid as Thompson's colt, you'll say that my client is totally unfit to undergo further questioning."

"You'd ought to know it without my taking the time and trouble to say so, but he's sick—a mighty sick man! Look at the fever in those eyes! Why, gentlemen of the jury, and you, judge, it sticks out far enough to hang a hat on!"

"Give him a box o' Magic Salve!" squeaked an assumed voice.

"Come and buy one for yourself; rub your throat with it for a week, and if you take care to keep your face hidden, people may mistake you for the ghost of a man," coolly retorted the grip-sack fakir, who knew that time was not being wasted so long as he could raise a laugh.

At this point David Hudson stepped to the side of the prisoner, cutting his bonds with a keen knife, removing the noose from about his neck and trampling it under foot.

"I'm only anticipating your orders, judge," he said, coldly, standing with one hand lightly resting on the shoulder of the giant, but with a revolver drawn and ready in his other. "Of course you'll declare Mr. Sparrow discharged."

"Und dhoese monev-pag off mein own?" harshly interposed Fritz Zimmer, undismayed by his repeated defeats and hard usage. "I say nein! I schwear dot roppel y py him! I schwear—"

"One case at a time, your Honor," interposed Silver-tongued Sid, ready to meet this new peril before it could grow worse. "My client is ready and able to explain everything, but as a man and a physician I must protest against his being kept on the rack longer this day! He is a sick man—a most mighty sick man! And unless he can have rest and quiet for a day at least, you'll all lay yourselves liable to the charge of rank murder!"

The tide seemed ebbing once more, and ugly murmurings arose from the opposition. They seemed to side with the German, despite the patriotic appeal made by the tall gambler a short time before, and Grip-sack Sid hurriedly whispered a few words into Hudson's ear:

"Back me up in playing for time, or the cake's all dough!"

With marvelous intuition the Capital City sport seemed to comprehend the situation, and promptly grappled with it. Stepping forward, he spoke rapidly and to the point:

"We have nothing to conceal, gentlemen, and all we ask is a fair shake. It only needs one look to see that Jonah Sparrow is too ill to even realize how terribly near he has come to being unjustly lynched. Why, even now he don't know where he is or what I am saying!"

All eyes turned toward that herculean figure, and even the most bloodthirsty being present could not deny that assertion.

The big fellow was gazing about him with a pitifully bewildered air, now and again slowly drawing a huge hand across his eyes and temples, as though striving to clear away the mists that cloued his poor brain.

"If you spent the entire night in his company, how do you account for those two empty money-bags being found in his cabin?" asked Henry Johnson, sharply.

"I haven't tried to account for them, as yet, but promise to do so at the proper time," was the cool response. "For a flyer, though; what's the matter with the real criminal dropping them there during the excitement while Sparrow was being arrested?"

"Ingenious, but hardly plausible!" sneered the other.

"I simply offer it as possible, not as the positive fact," bowed Hudson, with a faint smile. "Time enough for that when Sparrow is fit for trial."

"Will you go bail he don't seek a change of venue—say at the other end of the world?"

"I will," with cold emphasis. "I propose that Jonah Sparrow be taken to town and given board and lodging at the Jug until he is able to testify in his own behalf. Isn't that fair?"

"If there's nothing behind it—yes," reluctantly admitted the leader of the opposition.

"Every dollar I'm worth is ready to go down on his bail-bond, and if that is not sufficient, I'm ready to put myself into your hands as a hostage for his appearance when wanted."

"That's heap sight more'n 'nough fer a hog, an' I say whooray fer the King-pin o' Capital!" cried John Walkinshaw, enthusiastically.

Both Silver-tongued Sid and Cap Dawson added their mite, and even Johnson could find no further objection.

Fritz Zimmer was hardly satisfied, but his grumblings were unheeded if heard, and all seemed satisfied that there was to be no hanging that day, at least.

It was no easy matter to make Jonah Sparrow understand what was expected of him, and for a few minutes it seemed as though their good work would be all set at naught by his unlooked-for stubbornness. He insisted on going back to his cabin. There was a misery in his head, and the foolish buzzing of such a gang made it worse. He wanted quiet and sleep; he must go home with—where was his little woman?

She was clinging closely to him, even while he put the troubled question, sobbing, shivering, hardly less frightened than when she found him with that shameful rope about his neck.

Hudson spoke to her, but she repulsed him. Dawson tried to convince her that all would come out right in the end, but she refused to listen, her one cry being that she would not be separated from her father.

"All right; you shall have your will, dear Miss Sparrow," decided David Hudson. "Why not, gentlemen? There's room for them both,

and with the lady bearing him company, the most suspicious among you all will surely rest easy as to his breaking bail!"

Taking it for granted that no further objection would be raised, the tall gambler slipped a hand through the miner's arm on the side opposite to Retta, leading them toward Capital City, the crowd falling back on either hand to permit a passage.

Roger Glynn was about to interfere, a painful frown upon his pale face, but Silver-tongued Sid barred the way, his eyes glowing vividly as they caught that troubled look.

With a quick, careless motion the grip-sack fakir lifted a hand to his face, making a peculiar gesture which caused the young miner to start, catching his breath sharply as the action was deliberately repeated.

Harper turned and moved through the scattering crowd, and after a brief period of hesitation, his eyes turning wistfully toward the departing figure of his sweetheart, Roger Glynn followed the stranger who had given him a token which he felt in honor bound to respect.

Silver-tongued Sid halted as soon as he was fairly clear of the crowd, the majority of whom were moving toward town, and with a grave smile upon his face he extended a hand toward the young miner.

It was more than an ordinary handshake, though only the initiated would have suspected as much.

"In C. H. and P., brother!" softly uttered the Grip-sack Sharp.

"You gave the warning sign, and I obeyed it," huskily said Roger Glynn, casting a troubled glance after the vanishing figures of his loved one and her parent, escorted by Cap Dawson and David Hudson. "I had to, but—"

"It hurt, eh?" softly laughed Harper, pressing that unsteady hand reassuringly once more. "We are brothers, sworn and true. And as a Brother Workman I bid you hope for the best."

"But—that infernal gambler!"

"Let him run the length of his rope, brother. I agree to fetch him up with a round turn before he can work you further harm. And if you will trust in me, I agree to set Jonah Sparrow free as air, besides proving him as innocent of this dastardly outrage as you or myself!"

"Do that, and I'll be your slave forever!" impetuously cried the young man, his honest face all aglow with reviving hope.

"I only ask one favor of you in return for my work, brother."

CHAPTER XVI.

A WHIP AND A PIPE.

"I PROMISE in advance, and I'll make my word good though it takes a lifetime to repay you—only save that poor fellow, for her sweet sake!" brokenly but earnestly muttered the young miner.

"You agree to grant what I ask, then?" with a curious smile playing about his lips as their eyes met in unison with their palms.

"Shall I swear it by the oath of the Order, brother?"

Silver-tongued Sid dropped his exaggerated air, laughing lightly as he said:

"Promise me that if I clear Jonah Sparrow and put a spider into that tall sport's dumpling, you will lay in a good stock of Dewey's Magic Salve to begin housekeeping on."

Roger Glynn flushed and frowned, but Silver-tongued Sid kept his hand in a friendly vise while adding:

"You couldn't start out more wisely, but of course I was joking. You're all upset, or you'd never have thought to offer a Brother Workman a reward for simply doing his duty."

"I know—I admit it. But if you only know how much I've gone through with this day! And then—that cursed gambler!" his eyes flashing wickedly as he glanced toward the town, now nearly reached by the little escort amid which he could still distinguish the towering figure of his sweetheart's father.

"You're all broken up, and that's just why I drew you out of the crowd with the warning signal. You were tempted to knock Dave Hudson down and try to take his place, wasn't you?"

"He's a blackleg, and this isn't the first time he has tried to win a claim on my—on Miss Sparrow."

"Yet that same sport saved the neck of Miss Sparrow's father. Give the devil his due, Glynn, even if you don't exactly like the way he earns it. If he hadn't chipped in, just as he did, neither you nor I would have counted for a cent in this little rumpus."

"I know. I saw him cut the rope," reluctantly admitted Roger.

"That was once. He saved Sparrow after that, for if any other man had chipped in, John Walkinshaw would have carried his point with a rush. After all, David might have done a much poorer day's work."

Roger still smiling, looking gloomily downward, digging a hole in the sun-parched ground with his heel.

That was what troubled him: David Hudson

had done too much, while he himself had been able to do so little.

How would Retta view them both? Would not her gratitude for that inestimable service outweigh the love she had admitted feeling for him? Would she not repay that handsome—he was infernally handsome!

"Not a bit of it, dear fellow," said Grip-sack Sid, slipping a hand through the young man's arm and moving off, away from rather than toward town. "She's a true woman, and she knows that you did your level best for both. And then—don't forget the spider I hinted at."

"You know something to his disadvantage, then?" eagerly asked the young miner, keenly scrutinizing that strong face.

"I know that you and I are sworn brothers; I know that we belong to the same glorious Order; I know that it is part of our duty to help a brother in need. And so—if I don't know anything against David Hudson, be sure I'll hatch up something in time to prevent his touching you in your most tender spot!"

Roger's countenance gloomed, for he had counted on something more reassuring than words. He stopped short, releasing his arm.

"I'll try to thank you, when I'm more myself. I must go back to town and see what I can do to help my friends."

"If you want to help them best, come with me," quickly said Grip-sack Sid, restraining him. "I've got something important to show you, over yonder."

"But—"

"On my oath as a brother!"

Roger Glynn yielded, though it was but half-heartedly, after all.

"I'm not blaming you, pardner," said Silver-tongued Sid, falling into his light, easy manner of speech. "I've been there myself, and I know how danged hard it is for a fellow to take a back seat and watch another paying attentions to his dearest. But if by going with me you can be the very first to carry most important news to both Miss Sparrow and her father! If you can prove to her that there has been no murder committed at all!"

"What do you mean by that?" panted Glynn, excitedly.

Before Harper could make reply, the rapid clattering of iron-shod hoofs on the flinty soil drew their gaze toward the north, and they saw a woman swiftly galloping toward them, though doubtless her destination was the town itself.

"Trim as a posy, and handsome as a picture—gold mat and bronze frame!" muttered the Grip-sack Sharp in a tone of mild enthusiasm.

"It's Queen Coraline—Miss Hudson," said Roger, in an undertone, as his bruised face won a faint flush.

Silver-tongued Sid smiled slightly as he noted this, with one of his swift side looks, but he made no comment, for the fair equestrian was now only a short distance away.

Apparently Queen Coraline had not noticed them, as yet, for her eyes were turned to one side, as though watching some object of deep interest, and thanks to this the two men could take close note of her perfect figure, her graceful seat, without the fear of being deemed impertinently attentive.

Always remarkable for her queenly grace, thanks to her perfectly proportioned figure, Coraline Hudson never looked better than when robed for and in the saddle. She was a perfect horsewoman, though some doubtless would have thought her a little too dashing, in more civilized circles.

And as the two men gazed, they were given a specimen of her remarkable skill, for without the slightest warning, her spirited steed leaped far to one side, crouching like a cat, then plunging backward and rearing up until it seemed as though it must topple over backward, to crush its fair mistress beneath its heavy weight.

Roger Glynn uttered a sharp ejaculation, his face paling as he would have sprung forward to her aid, only for the firm grip which Silver-tongued Sid kept upon his arm.

"Look—she's boss!" coolly nodded the Grip-sack Sharp, a faint glow of admiration showing in his eyes, even while a quiet smile curled his lips.

Even if prepared for and on guard against such an exhibition, nine out of every ten good riders would have been shaken if not completely unseated, yet Queen Coraline showed not the slightest uneasiness, seeming part and parcel of the animal, even laughing lightly as one hand tapped him sharply between the ears.

"Steady, old fellow!" came her mellow tones. "Playing circus without an audience is—"

Her bright eyes rested on the two men, and a warm flush came into her beautiful face as Silver-tongued Sid softly clapped his hands in approval, then covered his action by lifting his hat with a low bow.

A touch of the keen spur sent the black horse forward, and Queen Coraline was passing them with a barely perceptible bow, when her jeweled whip dropped to the ground, almost at Sidney Harper's feet.

Roger Glynn would have picked it up, but the Grip-sack Sharp was ahead of him, doffing his hat and smiling blandly as he stepped toward

the fair rider, who wrenched in her steed an instant later.

"Thank you, Mr. Harper," she said, blushing charmingly, her glorious eyes fixed on his face with an ardent glow which could hardly be mistaken.

"Don't mention it—it cost me nothing," smiled the man, with another bow as he relinquished the jeweled toy.

He stepped back as though expecting her to ride on, but instead Queen Coraline leaned toward him, hurriedly whispering:

"I owe you revenge—dare you claim it, Sidney Harper?"

"I had almost forgotten, but I'll be at the table just as soon as the game opens again, Miss Hudson."

She drew back, her flushed face turning white, her eyes flashing, her whole person undergoing a sudden and peculiar change as she said, bitterly:

"I forgot—forgot that I'm only a gambler's decoy! When I'd give my heart's best blood to win—"

Spur and whip smote the black horse, and with an angry snort of pain and surprise he leaped madly forward, leaving Grip-sack Sid gazing after her, a queer twinkle in his steely eyes.

A moment later he turned to rejoin Roger Glynn, who was following the impetuous rider with an anxious gaze.

"She'll break her neck, one of these days!" he frowned.

"May I be near enough to mend it with—did I ever tell you that this marvelous invention of Brother Dewey's could even cure a dislocated neck or a broken heart? Well, it just can, though I'm hoping never to be called in by you because of either disease!"

"You started to say—"

"That Frank B. Dewey is a worth member of our most noble Order! If I didn't, let me make amends right now. In fact, only for Dewey I'd never have ridden the immortal goat that guards the secret of secrets in our sanctum sanctorum! If you could once meet Brother Dewey, it'd tickle you so immensely that you'd want to go right out and die!"

"Confound Dewey!" impatiently frowned the young man. "What I want now is to hear what you have to say—"

"About Dewey's Magic Salve!" blandly interrupted the grip-sack fakir. "Well, I don't blame you. It's a truly marvelous invention, and when it becomes better and more widely known—as it surely shall unless I lose my grip on immortal truth!—it's manifold virtues will send the name of F. Brigham D. sounding down the corridors of time until the vault above—Eh?" breaking abruptly off as the tormented young miner gave a groan of disgust.

"Colic? Feel like you'd swallowed a double corkscrew and had it suddenly come to life and diabolical activity?" asked the fakir, opening his grip and bringing to light a box of his panacea. "Never mind locating the trouble closely, for one virtue which marks this glorious remedy as pre-eminent is its git-thar-a-tiveness! Like a shot-gun loaded for general results; just point in that direction and the charge will scatter widely enough to cover the whole case—it will so."

Despite his anxiety to have that broken-off subject more fully made clear, Roger Glynn could not help smiling, though somewhat ruefully it must be admitted, at the enthusiasm of the fakir on behalf of his much vaunted nostrum.

"Better, looks like!" laughed Harper, slipping the box back in his grip and again taking his new-found friend's arm he moved on with his face turned toward the cabin in which the past night had witnessed such a dastardly deed. "A modern parallel to Captain Scott's coon. A disease has to be mighty stubborn, or terribly deep-seated, not to ignominiously flee at the first sight of the Magic Salve!"

Roger Glynn made no reply, but bore this glib-tongued stranger company in anxious suspense. He could not doubt him, for he had perfect faith in one who had been able to gain admission to that noble Order. Only for that, he would have forced full confession, or have turned away to rejoin his friends in town.

If Grip-sack Sid saw aught of this, he gave no sign, but talked almost without cessation until they came in sight of the lone hut, and were greeted by John Mitchell, whose face wore a troubled look as he held out one hand, a pipe resting on his palm.

"I found it just back of the cabin, sir," he said, shortly. "It was still warm, and there was a spark of fire in it as I knocked out the ashes. I hunted for the owner, but failed to see anything of him."

Silver-tongued Sid examined the pipe closely, then said:

"I think I know the owner. I'll return it to him in good time."

CHAPTER XVII.

TERRY MACK'S SPECULATION.

GROWLING like a hungry dog that had been driven from a bone, upon which it had just begun to test its teeth, Terry Mack bore Queen

Coraline company away from the scene of his brief struggle with Roger Glynn.

"Don't you be a bigger fool than nature contracted for, Terry Mack!" sharply uttered Miss Hudson, pausing to let her good steed come up alongside, as soon as they had put a bit of rising rocks between the cabin and their present position.

The red-haired miner brushed a hand across his eyes to clear away the dust and blood, but Queen Coraline curtly refused his proffered aid, touching pommel and cantle with her gloved hands, then leaping as lightly as a bird into the saddle.

"You'd ought to be on your knees to me as your patron saint, Terry Mack!" she added, with a low, half-contemptuous laugh as she moved away from the spot, a motion of her whip forcing the miner to bear her company. "Only for me—"

"Only for you I'd have killed that cursed scrub!"

"And pulled hemp as your fitting reward before yonder sun could go down this night? Would the prize be worth the cost, Terry Mack?"

His sulky growl indicated as much, but he did not venture to back it up in words. He had reasons of his own for not too openly opposing this brilliantly beautiful woman in word or in action.

"That scrub, as you call him, was good as his master, and I'm not so sure I wouldn't plank my good money on his side of the table in case you two lock horns again," persisted Queen Coraline, malice twinkling in her great eyes. "By the way, what were you quarreling over? Not that slip of a girl, surely?"

"Not that—not the way you mean," quickly protested Mack, his eyes filled with a warm glow as they rested upon that beautiful face. "The fool began to crow at sight, trying to drive me over the fence, just as though he had all the rights in the world. So—Well, he has you to thank for his getting off so mighty cheap!"

"And you have me to thank for getting off at all," with a curt nod as she rode ahead. "It was glorious—the way that giant played with you two champions! I could almost love him for that alone!"

A touch of the spur sent the black steed swiftly onward, her musical, malicious laugh floating back to tantalize the man who watched her proud figure until horse and rider were lost to view among the rocks.

"You can run away now, but the time'll come!" he muttered, his evil eyes glowing hotly as he let something of the truth appear in his bruised face. "Yes, the time'll come when I'll be the one to do the flouting, if any! And then—gods! you'll confess that you never even dreamed of what real love meant until that hour!"

Although Queen Coraline had vanished from sight, it seemed an effort on his part to remove his gaze from the point at which he had last seen her, and something like a genuine sigh was mingled with the long breath he drew.

Really, for one who had so recently been trying to frighten a girl into promising to become his wife, Terry Mack certainly wore a remarkably love-lorn look as he turned from watching another woman!

He looked back in the direction of the Sparrow cabin, pausing for a few moments in doubt; but this did not last long.

"I'll see it out, now I've lost so much more time than I counted on in the first place," he mentally decided, facing the rising grounds and showing himself an admirable rock-climber.

His thorough knowledge of the surrounding country stood him in good stead now, and without losing time in straying to one side or the other, he quickly gained the only point of rocks in that precise quarter from whence a fair view of the Sparrow home could be obtained.

"Near enough, and clear enough!" he muttered, slouching his hat to shade his eyes as he gazed across the intervening space. "That's Runt by the spring, waiting—and there she comes!"

He saw Retta leave the cabin and join Roger at the spring, and with a cynical smile curling his lips, the spy settled down in the shade of the rock, to wait and watch. And yet his gaze was hardly that of one lover who is forced to see a rival monopolizing the fair lady.

"Bill and coo—sip your fill, poor fools!" he muttered, with a short, hard laugh as he saw those two figures blend into one, as it seemed from his watch-tower. "Time's growing mighty short, and after the bolt falls—well, you're welcome to the pieces!"

He turned his gaze away from the lovers, toward town, the frown upon his face growing deeper as he failed to make the discovery he expected.

"Fire and fury! Surely there can't have been a fizzle? If there has—if he's made a botch of it—ha!" craning his neck and shading his eyes with a hand that trembled with eagerness. "I knew it! I knew it couldn't help coming my way!"

He caught sight of numerous men, strung out in irregular formation, but all with their faces

turned toward the Sparrow cabin. And seeing this, he knew that his devilish scheme was working toward its consummation.

"Risky? Of course!" he chuckled, rubbing his hairy paws together while his eyes glittered with satanic exultation. "What paying speculation isn't risky? What—oh, Jonah, my bullying giant! It's my turn coming, and I'd be perfectly happy if I only dared let you see just how it has all been brought about!"

Although he could hardly expect to gain a position from whence a fairer view might be had, Terry Mack left his perch and stole rapidly, cautiously through the broken tract, drawing nearer the little cabin home, his face that of a malicious devil as he chuckled over the promising prospect.

With all his eagerness he did not venture too near the scene of coming trouble, but crouching down under cover he watched the lynching party as they cautiously surrounded the nest in which they felt assured their bird of prey was roosting after his bloody feast.

"That's right! Take no odd chances, ye bloodhounds!" he chuckled as he noted their caution. "If the old fool was only himself, it'd take pretty nigh all your gang to pin him down—and there'd be broken bones and cracked crowns for the medical sharps to mend—heaps of 'em! Well, now, I'm chipping that way!"

More devil than man, he watched all that followed; the surprise of the lovers, and their vain attempt to alarm the slumbering giant in the cabin; the rousing up of Jonah Sparrow, and his dazed, unnatural manner as he stood in the doorway, staring blindly about him.

"Whisky, you're the devil!" he laughed, showing his teeth as he added: "But you're a dozen devils rolled into one when the right sort of priming is shaken up inside of you! If you only knew, Jonah! If I only dared yell out and show my hand! If I only—down 'em! down 'em both, ye devils!"

Not until all was over; not until Roger Glynn was securely bound and lying helpless; not until Jonah Sparrow was overpowered and John Walkinshaw had flung the noose of his lariat about the giant's neck; did the hidden schemer draw a free breath or unclinch his hands.

He was playing a bold and desperate game, for high stakes. Success meant wealth enough to satisfy even his greed, with a fair woman to help him spend it all, if everything turned out right. Failure—but he would not even think of that.

"I can't slip upon it, now!" he chuckled, rubbing his hands gleefully as he saw the disposition made of the giant. "They'll run him up Rogue Apple-tree before he's an hour older! And then—Curse it all! what does that mean?"

He saw Roger Glynn carried into the cabin and left there, together with Retta Sparrow. And as the mob moved away with Jonah Sparrow in their midst, he saw the stalwart figure of Fritz Zimmer standing in the door of the shack, gazing stolidly after them.

A troubled scowl came over his brutishly exultant face as he saw this, deepening as the guard made no move toward joining or following the crowd. In all his planning he had never once thought of such an obstacle as this.

"I want in—I've got to have in, yonder!" he grated, barely above his breath, uneasily fumbling at his belt, giving a little start as he failed to touch the weapon which customarily hung at his waist.

Only for that, he might have nerved himself to murder in his savage disappointment, before cooler reason came to his assistance.

He had particular reason for wishing to enter the cabin. He felt that something was hidden therein which he must secure before Retta Sparrow or her lover, Roger Glynn, could rally from the heavy blow his merciless hand had dealt them.

"Maybe we could make the rifle without them, but let me once get the papers in my grip, and then all's plain sailing! Then I'll have a safeguard against that other cool devil—and something warns me that I'll need it—need it, bad!"

From his hiding-place he could see Fritz Zimmer as he sat down in the doorway, chipping tobacco to fill his pipe. He could see him give a start and hurl his smoking bowl to the ground, then turn his face as though speaking to some one inside the building; but he could only surmise that this was Roger Glynn.

"I've got a bitter black mark across your name in my book, you Dutch whelp!" he snarled, shifting uneasily in hiding, yet afraid to venture nearer the cabin.

He could hardly do that without being seen by the man on guard, and though he might explain his presence plausibly enough to satisfy the stolid German, just then, he feared trouble might follow when others should learn of his movements in that quarter.

"She caught me once—twice might bring on a bit of throat-complaint!" he scowled, forced to bide his time.

That time came, just as he was on the point of abandoning his purpose as worse than vain.

He saw Fritz Zimmer spring to his feet and fade away from sight inside the cabin, and then, as he was wondering what this might mean, he

saw the stalwart guard rush outside and dash the water from a wooden bucket as he rushed down toward the spring.

Then, almost immediately after his return, with that cheery call of encouragement on his lips, Terry Mack caught some sounds which he failed to rightly interpret! And it was not until he saw Retta Sparrow dart out of the house and run in the direction of town, followed by Roger Glynn, that an inkling of the truth dawned upon his puzzled brain.

"Where's the Dutchman? What'd he turn 'em loose for? Why don't he show up? Curse the dark inside there! If I could only catch a glimpse!"

Almost beside himself with suspense and rage commingled, Terry Mack watched and waited, time and again cursing Queen Coraline for having deprived him of his weapons. If he had only his knife, he would make a rush for the cabin, risking a shot from the German in his fierce longing to solve that riddle.

"They've bought him out! And I counted on his word to help run the 'big devil up a tree!'" fumed the schemer, yellow with rage, kept from making a break only by his cowardice. "He'd blow me through at sight! But I'd risk it if I only had a gun!"

Then, dimly, indistinctly, he caught a sound from the cabin. What was it? It sounded like a groan—like a smothered appeal for aid!

An inkling of the truth flashed upon him, but it seemed too incredible for belief. How could a weak, unnerved girl and a bound man have overcome a stalwart, armed guard like Fritz Zimmer?

He hesitated until he heard Zimmer pouring forth a volley of hot German oaths as he rolled over and over, being caught by the narrow doorway, and then forcing the door shut in his struggle to get out.

Terry Mack took swift advantage of this fact, rushing lightly across the open and gaining the rear of the cabin before the hampered German could rectify the mistake he had made. And then the ruffian silently pushed open the back door.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE REWARD OF ROGUEY.

A SINGLE glance showed him that Fritz Zimmer was bound hand and foot, and in that same instant a plausible excuse for his presence there flashed across his cunning brain.

"Hellow, Zim!" he ejaculated, boldly entering the cabin, his face assuming a look of intense surprise. "How the Old Boy did you manage to tie yourself up in a knot like that?"

"I neifer—dot desfil vhas—gut me vree, kevick!" spluttered the enraged fellow, trying to rise, but vainly.

Terry Mack flashed a glance around, then caught up the same case-knife with which Retta Sparrow had set her lover free a few minutes before, saying as he bent over the panting guard:

"Played a trick on you, eh? Well, you can get even with 'em even yet if you pick up your legs right lively!"

"I vhatant—"

"And are wanted, too. They sent me back to take your place, as your evidence is needed to convict Jonah Sparrow. There you are!" as the hastily-applied bonds yielded to the edge of the knife and he jerked Zimmer to his feet. "No chin-music—pull out as lively as you know how, and never mind about telling them just how—"

But he was addressing unheeding ears. With a savage growl, the tall German leaped through the front door, rushing at top speed along the trail leading to town.

Terry Mack watched him with a laugh of triumph.

"Never stopped to say thank ye! Never even waited for a squint at the sweet mug of his deliverer! Dollars to cents that if asked, the mud-witted rascal couldn't even give a guess as to who set him free!"

This belief particularly pleased the schemer, and with a searching look about before closing the front door, Terry Mack began looking for the precious paper which accounted for his absence from the lynching-bee.

These documents related to the mine which promised to bring its owner in an independent fortune, despite the fact that its first claimants had abandoned it, after sinking far more gold than they had ever taken out of it.

Jonah Sparrow relocated the claim, and though nearly every one laughed at and made sport of him for being such a fool as to waste both time and money on a "petered out" mine, he stuck to work until he met with his reward. He struck a new vein, and though there were many richer ones about, in other hands, he expressed himself as satisfied with the results of his venture.

He hired Terry Mack to work for him, and that rascal assumed the title of foreman, though at no time did he have more than two men under him. Terry worked with his brain, fully as much as he did with his hands, and as time passed on he began to covet the mine, which

outsiders had facetiously dubbed "The Forlorn Hope."

There were wheels within wheels, all of them busily turning at the present time, but enough has been said to throw some light on the movements of the red-haired foreman.

Though so eager to complete the task he had set himself, Terry Mack did not go to work blindly. Thoroughly acquainted with the interior of the cabin, which he had visited far oftener than Retta Sparrow had liked, thanks to his position as foreman, he set about his search after a systematic fashion, beginning at one side of the living room and investigating every possible place of hiding in turn.

His face grew redder, his eyes took on an uglier glow as time passed on without bringing the discovery he thirsted for, but he would not despair while a single ray of hope lasted.

He satisfied himself that the coveted papers were not concealed in that part of the cabin, and then he entered Retta's room. Here he was no less thorough in his search, until not an available spot was left unexamined.

Then his pent-up rage found vent, and he cursed and blasphemed until his breath fairly failed him, for he knew now that his dearest hopes were baffled; that the precious documents in were no place under the roof.

"Where?" he panted, steadying himself by a grasp on the door casing, as he brushed the sweat from his glowing face. "Could he have put them on deposit?"

That unwelcome thought fairly blanched his face, and for a brief space he grew dizzy, staggering like a drunken man; but not for long.

"No—he never looked so far ahead as that! I know he had the papers in his bands not a week ago! And I don't believe—Hal!" with a sudden start, his bloodshot eyes catching a new light. "He had the papers with him when the noose tightened about his throat!"

For a few minutes Terry Mack seemed puzzled and at a loss just what course to follow. The longer he thought of it, the less likely his last solution looked. And yet—

"I don't dare waste any more time here," he muttered, passing to the nearly closed front door and peering keenly forth. "Some one may be along at any minute, and if caught here—Well," with a forced laugh that was anything but mirthful, "maybe I'd find it harder work to convince them than it was to satisfy Dutchy!"

With a lingering glance about the rooms where he had met nothing but bitter disappointment, Terry Mack left the cabin, hardly drawing a full breath before reaching secure cover amid the rocks.

"There's only one show left that I see," he frownedly muttered, turning his back toward the cabin and picking his way over the rocks in the direction of town. "If I can't find the papers on his body—Ugh!"

He shivered, but it was not wholly at the gruesome vision that rose before his mind's eye of a corpse with blackened face and protruding eyeballs. The death of one man did not count for so very much to him, and his hand had never touched that choking rope.

He was thinking how it might fare with him should he fail to hold those papers as a safeguard against his partner in evil.

"I'm not afraid of an open blow," he muttered, as he hastened on in the direction of the Rogue Apple-tree. "I hold a bigger trump than any he can show up. But—I need his help to win what I prize higher than gold. Only for that—well, I could cut his feet from under him too mighty quick!"

As he drew nearer to the point from whence he knew he could gain his first view of the Death Pine, Terry Mack grew a trifle paler, though there was nothing of remorse in his evil heart as he pictured what he was about to see: the corpse of the man who had never done him harm.

Then—a curse of almost stupefied amazement broke from his lips, and he repeatedly dashed a hand across his eyes, unable to believe the evidence of his own senses.

The Rogue Apple-tree was deserted. And there was no fresh crop of human fruit dangling from its horizontal bough!

And yet—surely there could have been no failure, after all he had plotted and planned and executed! Surely Jonah Sparrow had not escaped the rope!

"No—ten thousand times no!" he boarsely cried, almost staggering as he crossed the divide and drew nearer to the tree. "They cut him down—after the rope did its work! The girl was there—she softened them—but not too soon! He wouldn't permit that!"

And even while he so stoutly affirmed this, a hideous doubt was growing in the black heart of the scheming villain; a doubt of the man who had clasped hands and sworn with him to bring about the death of Jonah Sparrow by the hangman's noose.

If he had proven treacherous? If he had gone back on that solemn bargain? If he had—what if he had turned about and denounced his partner as the actual criminal? What if it had all been but a cunning trap to insnare him?

Terry Mack cowered down among the rocks

as those horrible doubts assailed him one by one, each growing stronger and more terrible than the ones coming before.

During those few minutes, Terry Mack was surely reaping the reward of his roguery!

"He wouldn't dare—with me alive to strike back at him!" he finally decided, plucking up courage and slowly moving off toward Capital City, longing yet dreading to meet some one from whose lips he could learn the whole truth.

The distance was not great, but by the time he had gained the edge of town, Terry Mack had fairly conquered his fears, at least to the outward eye. And catching sight of a face which he recognized as that of a friend, he eagerly joined the fellow, none the less well-satisfied for finding him pretty well under the influence of bad whisky.

"Had a little racket, I bear, pard?" he half-asserted, joining arms with the drunkard and moving on, but in a course that would not take them directly into the heart of the town. "What was it all about? I didn't catch just what."

"Then you wasn't thar?" with an expression of intense pity spreading over his face. "Good Lawd! if I don't pity ye all over an' back ag'in! Fer you've missed more fun than 'd fill up a month o' Sundays!"

Satisfied that nothing seriously detrimental to himself had come out, else this fellow would hardly meet him so frankly, Terry Mack plumped the bummer down to sober facts, quickly learning from him how Jonah Sparrow had cheated the rope, and by whose agency.

"Dave Hudson shot him down, you say?" he asked, with a curious glow in his bloodshot eyes. "Cut the rope with a bullet, then backed down the entire town?"

"That's what!" emphatically nodded the drunkard.

Terry Mack drooped his eyes, listening to the rest in grim silence. His friend spared no pains to make it a graphic recital, for he knew that Terry Mack generally had woney about his clothes, and he was always figuring on winning a free drink or two.

Nor was he disappointed on this occasion, for though Terry Mack declined to visit the nearest saloon in his company, he flipped the bummer a silver dollar, frowning blackly as he stood still and watched him eagerly seeking his god.

"Dave Hudson! Risked his life to save Jonah Sparrow from the rope! And he already swinging in the air! What does it all mean?"

He sat down on a low rock, settling his chin between his joined palms, with elbows supported on his knees. He stared at vacancy, but if his eyes were sightless, his brain was very busy.

He reviewed all the drunken bummer had told him, dwelling longest on the actions of David Hudson and the remarkable conversation of John Walkinshaw. Those two points seemed the most knotty and hard to crack.

Try as he might, he could not understand it at all!

"Is it a deliberate sell-out? Have they turned for him and against me? Will they try to—hell's blackest curses rest upon their heads if they really mean to play traitor!"

In his hot rage Terry Mack leaped to his feet with tightly-clinched hands, his face glowing red, his eyes seemingly on fire. But before he could pour forth the burning curses which flocked to his lips, he was startled by a cracked, peculiar voice:

"Hellow, pard! I was just thinkin' o' you!"

A hand mechanically dropped to his belt, before he recognized the speaker, but then he swiftly recovered his mental balance, forcing a smile as he called out in turn:

"I'm easy foun'd, Billy Mason, whether hunted for by friend or foe. What's biting you now?"

"Well," hesitated the new-comer, a small, insignificant-looking man in seedy garments. "Mebbe it don't need you to do the scratchin', nigh so much as 'twill Mat Singrey!"

"What do you mean by that?" scowled Mack, gripping an arm and gazing keenly into that foxy face. "What have you nosed out?"

"Nothin' much. Only that Dan Bryson ain't dead yit!"

Terry Mack staggered back as though a heavy hand had struck him.

CHAPTER XIX.

TIT FOR TAT IS FAIR PLAY.

THE distance was not great from where Queen Coraline left Silver-tongued Sid to the town itself, but before her good steed could cover the space, she had won the victory over herself, so far as her face was concerned. Possibly she looked a bit colder, a little prouder, but that was all.

As she entered 'own it was close at the heels of the little party escorting Jonah Sparrow and his daughter. The tall, well-dressed form of David Hudson was prominent among them, and as she noted this, a peculiar gleam came into those dark eyes.

A touch of the spur sent her steed past, and as the tall gambler instinctively flinched to keep from being struck by animal or rider, he glanced around and their eyes met. Only for an instant, but his handsome face flushed, then grew paler far than usual.

As for Queen Coraline she simply gave a slight gesture with her whip hand; only David Hudson saw or could interpret its meaning; but he knew that it was a command for him to seek her presence as soon as circumstances would permit.

She was at home, waiting for him in seeming carelessness when he entered the little but comfortable building he had secured for himself and sister shortly after his coming to Capital City, and a week or two before that sister made her

room was small, but fitted up with a degree of comfort, almost luxuriance, such as no other home in Capital City can boast.

The windows were shuttered, and heavy silken curtains, with rich lace drapery, almost entirely shut out the glare of sunlight, making the atmosphere within so dim and dusk that David Hudson paused on the threshold with a mattered ejaculation.

"Draw the curtains, Cora, unless you want me to stumble over some of your frippery and—"

"Break your darling old neck?"

"No—mash some of your household gods," amended Hudson, seemingly guided by her rich, mellow tones, for he entered and reached a window in safety.

He drew aside the curtain and slightly canted the shutters, letting in a band of light sufficient to reveal the room and its other occupant.

His own face was cast into deeper shadow by this maneuver, and he stood still, gazing keenly into the charming face opposite, as though trying to read the whole truth therein before venturing further.

If Queen Coraline so interpreted his actions, she gave no sign of annoyance. A slow smile lit up her countenance, and her red ripe lips curled slightly, as with amused contempt. But even as she seemed to invite that inspection, just so she seemed resolved not to first break the ice, and seeing this, David Hudson spoke:

"You bade me come to you at once, and here I am, Cora. What's the matter now?"

"You tell!" with a curt little nod. "Sit down. Don't be so careful of your charming complexion. Or—can it be that Dave Hudson has lost his nerve and turned coward—before a woman?"

His hand fell away from the curtain and he drew nearer the sarcastic speaker. This lessened the light, and Queen Coraline laughed shortly as she rose from the couch on which she had been half-reclining, to loop back each curtain and let in the mellow light.

"You said let there be light, and now you've got it, David," she laughed, then growing cold and even hard as she rested a hand on each of his shoulders, gazing intently into his face.

Despite his iron nerve, his color changed, though his eyes met hers without flinching in the slightest.

"You've got it in for me, I see, little woman," he quietly uttered, at length. "Why not spit it out in a lump? Or—Sit down, please!"

He caught her by the arms, swinging her lightly around to a seat on the couch, then dropping his own form into an easy-chair a few feet away.

"You're a big brute, David," laughed Queen Coraline, smoothing her drapery. "And yet—do you know? I rather like you the better for it. Is the Sparrow girl of my opinion, David?"

The tall gambler frowned, bending forward in his chair, pushing his drooping mustache between his teeth.

"I wish I knew just what your opinion is, Cora," he frowned.

"My opinion is that you are over head and ears in love with Retta Sparrow, David," still with that curious glitter in her dark eyes.

"I don't say that," he quickly interposed, but with a languid wave of her hand, sparkling with rings, she continued:

"My opinion is that you have cast all idea of caution to the winds, and are secretly determined to win a slender sapling for a rib, though the heavens fall!"

"Will you never be sober?" he frowned, angrily. "You're making a mountain out of a mole-hill, just because you saw me—"

"Pouring hot love all over that weed of a girl with your glorious eyes—just so!" nodded Queen Coraline, with a malicious laugh.

David Hudson brightened up a bit at that sound, though back of it might lay serious mischief if not danger to him and his plans.

"What could I do? The poor child was in trouble. You surely know something of what has happened to-day?"

"I knew something about it long before to-day, David," with a repetition of that meaning laugh. "Am I a child? Am I less than half-witted? Do you think I pass through this world with both eyes and ears shut to all that is going on about me?"

"Then you know?"

"Far more than I care to tell—far more than it would be at all healthy for Capital City to listen to, David!"

Once more the gambler lost a portion of his gloom, for if she could treat the subject after a half-jesting mood, surely her pride was not seriously stung.

"You'll never let the facts leak out, little woman," with a nod. "If you had thought of that, matters wouldn't have gone nearly so far. I would have trusted you from hock to soda, only—"

A wave of her ringed hand checked his conciliatory speech.

"What bothers me not a little is wondering how you mean to dispose of the man already in the way? What are you going to do with young Roger Glynn?"

"That point don't worry me half as much as—Coraline, you are not going to make a bad break, I trust?"

"Doesn't your trust come rather late, David? Did you mean to keep me altogether in the dark until you brought a new—a wife to preside over your home?"

"Of course I meant to tell you all about it, but don't forget that the secret is only partly mine, and knowing how you dislike Terry Mack, I thought it best to wait until matters grew a little more settled. Now, however, I'll tell you anything you may ask."

"First, what do you mean to do with me?"

His eyes dropped at that cold, hard question, but he made no direct reply, muttering with a dark frown:

"There's big money in it! So big that it'd be a blooming shame to throw the chance over my shoulder. And so—what do you demand?"

Queen Coraline sunk back upon the couch with a low, amused laugh, in which there was not a trace of bitterness perceptible.

"What can I demand? Was there ever a loving sister who could keep her cherished brother from running his blessed neck into a noose, if said brother took a good and solid notion that way?"

"If you only were my sister!"

"Am I not, then?" with a poorly disguised sneer curling her red lips and echoing through her deep, musical voice. "Not a soul in Capital City knows to the contrary. For Terry Mack don't count; he never had a soul! But as I said before: what do you mean to do with me?"

"Name your own conditions, Cora. I'll meet them if it breaks me all up."

"Even if I were to say—let up on your schemes against Retta Sparrow!" mockingly.

"All but that, of course. I'll never give up my hopes of winning her love, even if I have to fight against you in order to get there!"

"So bad as all that comes to?" with arching brows.

"Just so bad as all that comes to—yes!"

"All right. Tit for tat is fair play the world over. Take your new flame. I'll take mine. Then we'll call it quits and begin a new deal all 'round the board."

David Hudson gave a start at this cool speech, and a flame of color flashed into his handsome face. Queen Coraline laughed lightly as she noted this, and drawled forth:

"Poor Tray! He covets both the bone in his mouth, and the shadow in the water beneath! And there's many a better, wiser, smarter, handsomer man who would confess that any one woman was much more than enough!"

"But you—who is it you mean?" hesitated Hudson.

"It is—not Terry Mack, be sure," was the laughing retort, enjoying his surprise, but failing to fully understand the start which he gave at her mention of that name. "What matter to you who the future delighted may be? If I stand aside and permit you to win your new flame—tall enough to weigh a ton instead of being a light-weight! If I let you rope her in, what matters it to you where I go or to whom I drop my 'kerchief'?"

"Well, let that pass," drawing a long breath as of relief. "Take whom you will, my best wishes go with you. Of course he'll not find you a beggar on his hands."

"Of course not," with a remarkably prompt bow. "I was just coming to that. If we are to dissolve partnership, of course there must be a settlement between us. Say—a quarter of a century!"

David Hudson started slightly at this, but said nothing, and Queen Coraline coolly added:

"Twenty-five thousand will just about fit my—. Of course you will not kick. Part of it was of my earning, anyway, and then—you say there's big money in your present game."

"So there is; too big money for it all to go to that shrunken up rascal, Runty Scrub. Then you are satisfied, Cora?"

"If not, I'll never tell you, David Hudson," her voice and manner changing abruptly as she sprang to her feet, eyes glowing and face richly flushed. "In one respect at least I'm a true woman. When love goes, be sure I'm too proud ever to try to whistle it back again."

"Coral you mean—"

"Business, from this hour on, David," with still another change. "Pay me the cash down, and when I've fairly counted it over—for men are sometimes born tricky, you want to remember, old fellow!—then I'll sign away all my sisterly rights and leave you to win your mountain pink, while I— David!"

"What now?" with a troubled frown darkening his countenance.

"You solemnly swear that you'll fork over the ducats I named?"

"You shall have them this very night, if you wish."

"Thanks. It may be just as well," with a smile. "We'll both feel easier when accounts are fairly squared."

"And—Cora, of course you were joking about—curse it all, girl!" his composure fairly giving way at last. "You were only joking when you said you liked another man?"

"Be sure that man will find it a delicious jest, David."

"Who is he? Tell me his name!"

"It might be Terry Mack, but it isn't. Possibly I have been smitten by the lover, even as you were with the sweetheart: I've seen worse looking fellows than that same Roger Glynn."

Laughing lightly, making him a mock courtesy, Queen Coraline turned and swept out of the room.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM.

Both Jonah Sparrow and his daughter looked up quickly as the door opened and gave admittance to the man who had so adroitly severed the rope which was drawing the giant miner up to a shameful death.

"You are looking better, Mr. Sparrow," said Hudson, forcing a smile as he extended a hand to each. "The fever is dying out, and you will soon be yourself again."

Retta flushed and her eyes drooped before his admiring gaze. Only too well she knew that strong drink had caused that strange stupor, and she knew, too, that David Hudson only spoke of the fever as a friendly blind.

"I don't know—I'm feeling mighty strange," muttered Jonah Sparrow, pressing a hand to his dully throbbing temples. "My brain is all a-buzz, and I can't think as I ought to. That cursed rope—"

"Try to forget all that, dear sir, and yet—you are not suffering any ill effects of that terrible scene, Miss Retta?"

The girl did not answer him directly. Her reddened eyes were fixed upon his pale face with an earnestness hard to describe. It was as though she was trying to read all that lay beneath the surface, her daughterly fears awakened by something in his unsteady, unnatural manner of speaking.

"You are keeping something back, Mr. Hudson. There is something which we ought to know, but which you are afraid to tell us!" she at length exclaimed, her voice weak and tremulous with strong emotion.

"They ain't—it isn't the rope again?" hoarsely cried Jonah Sparrow, his face paling and his huge frame shivering.

Only one who has felt the choking noose of an angry mob can even begin to comprehend what horror such a fear can inspire even in the most courageous; and this poor fellow was all broken down by that poisonous drug which Terry Mack had contrived to slip into his whisky flask.

David Hudson made no immediate reply. He seemed to be listening, like one who more than expects to hear ugly sounds break forth with the passage of each moment. And as those two afflicted ones watched him, they read confirmation of their worst fears in his handsome face.

"Save him—save my poor father!" moaned Retta, reaching her clasped hands toward him, tears dimming her eyes. "Save him from those howling demons, and a broken-hearted daughter will bless your name forever and ever!"

"It may not be so bad as that, dear child," Hudson said, taking her hands and pressing them against his breast, as though by impulse. "I try to hope—I will not believe that it will come to such a terrible extremity. And yet—I can't lie to you, Retta Sparrow," his voice growing husky with strong emotion.

"You won't let 'em take me—give me a gun or a knife—anything to fight the devils back and die, if die I must, like a man!"

For the moment Jonah Sparrow seemed like his old self, and as that magnificent form towered up before him, the gambler shrank involuntarily back. For he could not help picturing what would be his fate in those mighty hands, if the miner should only suspect what an evil and treacherous part he had been playing!

But it was only a fleeting rally. That stupefying drug had not entirely exhausted its effect, and with a husky groan the poor fellow sunk back upon his pallet, weak and benumbed from head to foot.

"I'll do all I can for you—for your father, dear girl," leading Retta back to the seat she had deserted at his entrance. "But as a true and honest friend, I dare not conceal from you both that trouble is brewing again."

"He is innocent—you know he never committed those dreadful crimes," sobbed the poor girl.

"I do know—so firmly did I believe in his innocence that I boldly perjured myself before all the town," adroitly uttered the tall gambler, never entirely forgetting his own interests. "I

swore that I spent the entire night under his roof, in his and your company. I did it because I could see no other means of saving him from the rope."

"It was kind—it was nobly done!" sobbed Retta. "It will not be recorded as a sin against you, since it was to save life."

"Not up yonder, perhaps," said Hudson, with a short, forced laugh. "But down here—well, already my name is cursed even more viciously than that of the one who mur—who was accused of murdering Daniel Bryson and his partner. And as I came here, just now, I heard more than one Russian broadly hint that before the moon rose to-night I'd be pulling hemp for having dared to cheat the gallows by perjury!"

Truly, David Hudson was proving himself a Job's comforter, but poor Retta was too sadly frightened, too utterly unnerved by all she had suffered that day, to note how cunningly he chose his words. After all he had done for them, how could she suspect him of evil intentions?

Jonah Sparrow rallied once more, though he was but the wreck of his usual self, either in mind or in body. The bad whisky had died out of his body, but the effects of that drug were still strong, though with each passing hour he was getting the better of even that.

Just now, though, he was weak and shaken, and showed his fears as he would have scorned to do when well and hearty.

"Isn't there any chance of escaping those devils, sir?" he asked, in unsteady, husky tones. "Can't you do anything? You fought 'em off once, and—for her sweet sake!" with a despairing look toward Retta.

"'Twill be for her sweet sake if at all!" impulsively cried David Hudson.

"For my sake, then!" cried Retta, forgetting all in her love for her sole remaining parent. "Save his life, and I'll never forget your services, though I should live to be a hundred years old! Save him!"

David Hudson frowned, even while his eyes looked passionate love into that fair young face—fairer than ever, he told himself, despite its pallor, its fear, its almost despair. And feeling that at last the time had come for him to speak out plainly, he obeyed that impulse.

"It might possibly be done, but only at a fearful risk and cost. As I said, I'm already a marked man in town for what I did at the Rogue Apple-tree. To do more would surely doom me to the rope, and cause the utter loss of my property here in town."

Retta moaned, shrinking back and biding her eyes with her trembling hands, but Jonah Sparrow hastily uttered:

"I'll make it good. I'll pay you any price if you'll only run me out of their clutches! Do it—say you'll do it, man!" he pleaded, great tears escaping his eyes and rolling down his heavy beard. "If not for the sake of a fellow-being like yourself, then do it for her sake—for my poor little girl! It's killing her—killing her by inches!"

"It will be for her sake, if at all," with strong earnestness in his tones, and something lying back of them that caused Retta to uncover her eyes and gaze into his flushed face with a new fear blending with the old dread. "I'd do it for no other living person, not even to save my own brother, were he standing in your shoes, Jonah Sparrow."

"Then you will—you can get us away before the mob comes back? Say you will, and I'll pay you 'most any price you can ask!"

"And you, Retta?" turning toward the startled maiden once more. "If I save your father, at the risk of my own life, losing all my property as I must, what reward will you give me?"

"The nightly prayer of a grateful child—what more can I give?"

"Your hand, and your heart with it, dear Retta," he swiftly uttered, as he reached out his hands toward her. "Swear that you will reward me in the only way I can ever take pay from you, and I'll face down the entire town again, just as I did this day. Swear it, Retta!"

But the poor girl shrank back with a low moan of bitter torture, and Jonah Sparrow huskily remonstrated:

"She can't—he's already promised."

"To whom?" with a hard, bitter laugh. "To a coward who dares n't even show his face within sight of your refuge! To one not worthy to lick the dust from her feet! To one—"

"I love him! I cannot—Oh, father, dear father!"

Blindly staggering, she fell into those loving arms, and for the moment forgetting all else in her grief, Jonah Sparrow broke out with:

"You're cruel to put us to such a bitter test, Dave Hudson. You know we can't accept your offer, and it's unmanly to press such a point longer."

"I am giving up all my worldly goods; I am risking my life, for by helping you to escape, I'd put the whole mob on my track, rope in hand; and all I ask is that I'll throw over the cur who left her in her direst trouble, in favor of a man! Ay, a man! For if you could see and hear the gathering mob as I saw and heard

them, you'd know it called for pure manhood to even think of facing them! Now—hark!"

From outside came ominous sounds, and Hudson swiftly cried:

"Quick! before it is everlasting too late! Swear to marry me, or I'll leave you to your fate! Swear—it's your last chance!"

CHAPTER XXI.

WAITING AND WATCHING.

JOHN MITCHELL drew what seemed to be a breath of relief as his hurried report was received with such ease by Silver-tongued Sid.

"Then it isn't anything very serious?" he asked.

"Rather on the comic order, I should say," quietly replied the Grip-sack Sharp, turning the pipe over in his hand and looking at it as though the only question came from a work-of-art standpoint. "Material wood, subject the human face divine, species Africanus. Very well executed, considering its probable selling price. Observe the touch of realism in those black and white eyes, I beg of you! Simply glass beads, but one would feel tempted to bet that you could make 'em wink just by sticking out a finger suddenly at them."

The look of approval deepened on his face, and one ignorant of the situation might easily have thought he had discovered a relic of by-gone ages, worth incalculable sums, from an ethnological point of view.

From the interior of the rude hut came a low, indistinct sound. Roger Glynn started in surprise, his bronzed face paling. John Mitchell caught the placid glance of those steel-gray eyes, and almost imperceptibly shook his head. Silver-tongued Sid slipped the pipe into his grip-sack, observing in a matter-of-fact tone:

"I'm pretty sure I know the gentleman who owns this relic, and if I chance to run up against him before I clean forget, I'll have the pleasure of restoring his lost property. And to do so the more gracefully, John, maybe it might be just as well to take a little look at the exact point where you chanced upon the discovery."

Mitchell led the way to the rear of the cabin, pausing beside a dense little clump of bushes, some half-score yards from the building.

In silence he pointed to where two human knees had left their imprint in a bit of sandy soil back of the bushes, and Silver-tongued Sid nodded his approval as he murmured:

"Devout creature! Saying his prayers 'way out here in the wilderness! High as he stood in my estimation, I hardly gave the dear fellow credit for so much religion!"

Bending low, with eyes glittering vividly, the Grip-sack Sharp moved from the bushes to the rear of the cabin, his actions resembling those of a hound picking up a cold scent. And close against the wall, he silently pointed out two more knee-prints to Mitchell, softly saying:

"You're about his height, Johnny. Take a knee down in those tracks and see if you can see anything beyond these rough walls."

Mitchell obeyed, and almost immediately thereafter, he thrust his finger into a crevice between two crooked sticks, saying:

"I can see everything inside the shack, boss!"

"Just as I reckoned," with a curt nod. "Well, 'tisn't fair to let Billy be wiser than the rest of us, so, unless you've some serious objections, Johnny, we'll take a look, too."

Mitchell drew back as though to yield his place, but Silver-tongue shook his head with a quiet smile.

"We'll take ours straight, Johnny, thank you. It gives me courage to kneel oftener than at bedtime, and our mutual friend Roger, here, belongs to the standing army. We'll walk in at the door, white fashion!"

Grip-sack Sid, having finally made up his mind to place full and implicit confidence in Roger Glynn, now briskly led the way around the shack and into the rude structure.

Timothy Timberlake gravely bowed at their entrance, then left his station by the rude pallet on which Daniel Bryson still reclined.

"How is he making it, Timberlake?" softly asked Harper, his gaze riveted on that terribly haggard face.

"There hasn't been much change. A very little stronger, if anything. And if we can keep the fever down, he has a chance to pull through," was the quiet response.

Roger Glynn was staring at the patient, his face the field for curiously conflicting emotions. He had never personally known the man of whose murder Jonah Sparrow was accused, but—surely this must be he! Surely—

"Say it is—say he's the man!" he blearily gasped, gripping an arm of his new-found friend with such fierceness that it seemed as though his fingertips would meet through the flesh.

"I'd make oath he was the man in the moon, for the sake of breaking your grip, Glynn," half-laughed Silver-tongued Sid, catching that wrist with his free hand and giving it a squeeze that seemed to paralyze the fingers. "Thanks! Now I'll admit you're quite right; this is Daniel Bryson, the very gentleman for whose foul murder Jonah Sparrow was being strung up to the limb of Rogue Apple-tree."

"And you knew he was alive, all the time?" flashed Roger, his honest face catching an indul-

nant glow. "You knew this, and never even dropped a hint that no murder—"

The wounded miner gave a moan, moving his bandaged head restlessly on its coarse pillow. Timothy Timberlake sharply clapped a hand over the young man's lips, frowning darkly as he muttered:

"Quiet, unless you want to lay yourself open to the charge of murder. I must insist on quiet, or throw up the case."

"Alive—not dead?" panted the astounded youth, then moving toward the door as he added: "I'll fetch a doctor to—"

"Don't be in such a mighty rush, pardner," said Silver-tongued Sid as he caught an arm, though without fully checking the young miner until both had crossed the threshold.

"But you don't know—you don't seem to realize how much hangs on the recovery of that poor devil in yonder!" impatiently cried Glynn.

"I know that so long as he lives, Jonah Sparrow can't be legally hanged for his death, but a little law goes a mighty long ways with a gang such as Capital City can show up at a minute's notice."

"So much the more reason why no time ought to be lost in securing a doctor for the man in yonder. Will you let go?"

"When you begin to understand what I know: that in Timothy Timberlake, Dan Bryson has a physician who can double-discount any medical sharp Capital City ever saw before our arrival."

"If he is the doctor, you say, what is he doing—"

Roger Glynn broke off, flushing a bit as he realized what meaning might be attached to the words almost ready to drop from his lips. But Harper laughed pleasantly as he supplied the omission:

"What is he doing with me, a traveling fakir? Showing his mighty good sense by recognizing a good thing when he sees it, of course. And though he is a regular M. D., with sheepskin and all, Timothy proves his sound judgment by bowing to Dewey's Magic Salve as the Boss!"

Young Glynn looked into that strong face, puzzled to decide. Was he indeed a crank, or simply a money-loving fraud?

Silver-tongued Sid laughed softly as his keen eyes read those doubts, and once again his warm hand closed upon that of the young miner, giving it the grip of goodfellowship.

"I'm a fool, and you—I'll trust you though I have to do so with both eyes shut and ears plugged up!" impulsively cried Glynn.

"That's hearty, and all I ask for," nodded Harper, growing earnest and less like a mountebank as he added: "As a brother I know I can trust you, but it didn't look right to have the confidence all on one side. You've admitted as much, and now— There is something back of all this, and we're using the Magic Salve simply as a stalking-horse, so to speak."

"And your friend in yonder? He is capable of—"

"Timberlake can bring the poor fellow back to life and reason, if human skill can work such a miracle," was the confident response. "I left him on guard while I tried my level best to make the Rogue Apple-tree in time to help cheat the rope."

"Surely, if you had told the gang that Bryson was still alive, they would have listened with less trouble!"

"Maybe yes, maybe no. There are wheels within wheels, and rather than run the risk of having all the truth come out, those mainly responsible for this trouble would hardly have balked at burning powder to completely cover their tracks. And so—I simply held that fact in reserve, to draw on only in case all other means should fail. Of course, had it become necessary, I would have told everything."

Roger was silenced, though from his troubled face it was plain to be seen he was far from being satisfied.

"Because you don't know just how much hangs in the balance, dear fellow," earnestly added Harper. "All you see is the peril still menacing the father of a very charming young lady, but back of that I see a great deal more."

"Then you think—"

"That we must have a little more patience. Timberlake has been waiting and watching, studying this case. He says that just as soon as possible he will give me the word that I may speak, and try to make Bryson speak, also. When that time comes—"

"Will it ever come?" half-groaned the young miner, dashing drops of cold sweat, born of intense anxiety and powerful suspense, from his brow. "Think of that poor old man—think of his daughter, waiting in fear and trembling, hearing the death-yell of the mob in every growing sound! Oh, it will kill the poor child!"

"They are safe for this day, at least, and long before another sun rises I'm hoping to have the truth bottled up in quantities big and strong enough to knock all the fire out of that same mob."

More to check the young man than from any hope that the longed-for hour had arrived, Silver-tongued Sid turned back and entered the

rude cabin once more. Timberlake shook his head, with a finger-tip on his lips.

Bryson lay like a corpse on his pallet, but as they gazed, they could see his broad chest slowly rising and falling. He was sleeping like a child.

The minutes crept by with leaden pace. Roger Glynn suffered more than words can tell from suspense. He was picturing the torments his loved one and her father must be subjected to while waiting, and he felt that he could not stay longer from their side.

"What will they think of me?" he mentally groaned. "What lies will that infernal black-leg pour into their ears? Curse him from top to toe!"

Silver-tongued Sid saw something of this, and though he held out for a long time, at length he felt forced to yield, and rising, he motioned Glynn to bear him company outside. If nothing more, the young miner would gain a certain degree of relief by being able to walk about and talk.

"How much longer must we wait? It's almost killing me—then think what it must be to those poor creatures over in town!"

"They are suffering less than you are, beyond a doubt," was the reply. "They know that good and powerful friends are guarding them, and will have faith that innocence must surely prevail in the end."

"Do you call Dave Hudson one of those true friends?"

"Didn't he prove himself one when he cut the rope with his bullet?" smiled the Grip-sack Sharp. "Come, Brother Glynn, don't let prejudice run away with your judgment. Hudson may not be an angel, but he accomplished what no other man from Capital City could have brought about without death and revolution.

"But I didn't bring you out here to tell you what, in your sober senses, you must fully realize. While we have to wait, I thought I'd let you know that this Sparrow affair is simply a by-play; that back of Bryson's misadventure lies a still deeper, more audacious game.

"As a Brother Workman I know I can trust you to keep our secret until I give you leave to speak, and with that understanding I tell you frankly that I believe this outrage simply part of a plot to get hold of Jonah Sparrow's bonanza, and possibly the young lady, also."

"Then—Terry Mack is at the bottom of it all!" cried Roger, his eyes flashing and his hands clinching.

"Well, Terry is said to be a great hand for the girls!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TRUE STORY OF THE TRAGEDY.

SILVER-TONGUED SID smiled evasively as he uttered that sentence, but he might not have escaped so easily, only for an interruption which came from the little shack, just in time.

Timothy Timberlake appeared in the open door, giving a low signal which took the Grip-sack Sharp hastily toward him, closely followed by the excited young miner.

"The time has come, then?"

"If you still insist upon running the risk, I believe it has," was the grave response as that tall, slender, awkward figure made way to admit them.

Silver-tongued Sid cast a glance toward the bed, where Daniel Bryson lay motionless, seemingly fast locked in slumber. There was little change to be noted, though he did fancy that the pale face looked a trifle less haggard, the cheeks a bit less chalk-like.

"The risk is so very great, then?" he slowly asked.

"It is a risk; just how great I am not prepared to state. He has a marvelously powerful constitution. He has gone through with enough to insure the death of half a dozen ordinary men. He may rally again, but humanly speaking, the chances are hardly even that he will, if this sleep be broken as you wish."

There was a brief silence, broken only by the uneasy shifting of Roger Glynn. He longed to urge haste, but dared not in his ignorance.

"Then—it will not be certain death to him?" slowly asked the Grip-sack Sharp, his gaze coming back to the grave face of his aide.

"I think not. There is risk—great risk, in fact. He needs a great deal more just such sleep as he is getting now. That is giving him more strength than all the medicines I can administer."

"It will not take so long to get at the truth. After that he can sleep again."

"Yes, if the drug doesn't rob him of the power to obtain it."

"Will it have that effect?"

"I only wish I could say, for certain," with the troubled look deepening in his face. "I can promise to rouse him up, with brain as clear and active as it was before he received his hurts, but whether that brain will quiet again, sufficiently to permit him to gain the natural slumber which alone can save him, is beyond my power to tell."

"Two lives ought to outweigh one—and one of them a girl!" huskily murmured Roger Glynn.

"You're right!" said Harper, with sudden decision. "Two lives depend on his telling the

true story of this affair, Timberlake, and we have no right to deny them that chance of safety. Give him your dose, and may God help them all!"

From that all-containing grip-sack Timberlake took a small package, opening it and holding to the light a small metallic flask. This gave out a peculiarly pungent odor when opened, and with a hand as steady as fate, the tall man poured the drug, one drop at a time, between those slightly parted lips.

Breathlessly the other watched, shivering in sympathy with the patient as a tremor ran over his powerful frame. Then—his heavy lids opened and his head partly lifted from the pillow of grass as he faintly cried out:

"Don't—what have I done, pardner?"

Motioning for water, Timberlake slipped an arm under Bryson's head, and taking the tin cup from Harper's hand, held it to those quivering lips. And Bryson drank freely, drawing a long breath after, as he gazed curiously, doubtfully into the kindly face above him.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice weak but perfectly clear. "How did you—Where's that devil gone to?"

"He is safe, where he can't hurt you any more," quietly replied Timberlake, then drawing back, to give place to Silver-tongued Sid.

"Don't try to talk, Bryson, until you've had time to collect your thoughts," he said, soothingly, but with a warning glance toward John Mitchell, who stood partly hidden, pencil and paper in readiness. "Let me tell you a few things, first, then we'll hear your side of the story."

"This forenoon a man came into Capital City, covered with blood, seemingly badly hurt. He was crying aloud for vengeance on the villain who had brutally murdered his partner, and—"

"Mat Singrey—curse him!"

"Yes, that man was Matthew Singrey," quietly nodded Harper, affecting to misunderstand the purport of that fierce outburst. "He swore that the thief roused him up, and shot him because he tried to save you from harm. He swore that he recognized the rascal, and sent the howling mob after Jonah Sparrow, to lynch him for the crime."

"He lied—the cur!" flashed Bryson, trying to rise, but yielding to the strong hand that gently restrained him.

"Then Jonah Sparrow did not rob and almost murder you?"

"He did not. I haven't seen him for nearly a month. Mat Singrey was the man—the devil, rather!"

"Will you try to be calm, and give us the whole story, so it can be brought in evidence to save an innocent man from hanging?"

"Singrey didn't get away?"

"No. He is where we can lay hands upon him when wanted. But poor Sparrow was gained a respite from the rope, almost by a miracle. He is still in deadly peril, and only your evidence can surely save him from dying like a sheep-killing cur for another's crime. Will you save him? And at the same time get even with those who so bitterly injured you?"

"You bet I will!" with almost savage emphasis. "Write down all I tell you, and I'll sign it, to guard against accidents. But I'll tell you the story with my own lips, while that devil stands with the rope about his neck!"

Timothy Timberlake frowned, the uneasy light in his eyes growing more pronounced, for he began to fear that the end of all this strong excitement could but end in a fatal collapse when the effects of the subtle drug should die away. But the die was cast. All he could do was to wait and hope for the best.

With hardly a break Daniel Bryson went on and gave an account of what had taken place on the night before. No man ever spoke more clearly, or seemed in more perfect possession of his mental powers, while his bodily strength was something wonderful, considering all he had gone through with.

He said that himself and partner had retired at about the usual hour, and that Mat Singrey had seemed unusually friendly all the evening. There had been nothing like a quarrel, nor had even a friendly dispute taken place between them.

He said that he was suddenly awakened, well along in the night, by a loud noise and a horrible pain tearing through his brain.

"It seemed as though my whole head was being ground to powder in a mill of some sort," as he described the sensation.

As he partly started up, he saw Matthew Singrey by the second flash of his revolver, but by his sudden movement he escaped that shot.

"I knew, then, that he meant to murder me for our gold, and I drew my gun and let him have it!"

He said that Singrey stumbled and fell at his shot, and that before he could rise, he leaped from the pallet upon him, knowing that he was fighting for dear life.

Singrey stabbed him twice before he managed to disarm him by beating him over the head with a pistol. He said that he caught up the same knife and felt it meet firm flesh just before Singrey fired once more.

"That stunned me—seemed to paralyze me all over. I reckon he thought his work was done, for I saw him, by the moonlight, go to our hiding-place and steal the dust we held in common. I reckon I must have made some sound—I know I tried mighty hard to yell out and to jump on the devil who was robbing me—for Singrey came back and hit me once. How many more times I'll never tell you, for I never knew anything more until just a minute ago."

Silver-tongued Sid listened with keen interest to this recital, but as no other name but that of Mat Singrey was mentioned by the wounded man, his brows came nearer together and a puzzled look showed in his gray eyes.

"There must have been others besides Mat Singrey mixed up in the scrape, Bryson," he said, as the miner ended his story. "Think again; can't you recall some other face, some other figure? There was only the moonlight to guide yourself by, remember."

"I saw no other person," firmly declared Bryson. "Singrey did it all. If there were others, they never showed up until after I was lost to all consciousness."

Mitchell silently handed Harper the written notes, and after Bryson had hastily glanced over them, he asked for the pencil, signing his name in legible characters, declaring that on his oath all was true.

"And now—catch Mat Singrey! But don't hang him. Hold him until I can see him die! I must at least touch the rope as it hauls him up Rogue Apple-tree!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

TERRY MACK CARRIES THE NEWS.

The red-headed foreman of the Forlorn Hope could hardly have been more utterly confounded had a meteor dropped at his feet, than he was at the words Billy Mason so easily pronounced.

He started back like one on receipt of a stunning blow, and his face turned as pale as its natural color would permit. There was something of a hunted, wild-beast look in his eyes as he hoarsely exclaimed:

"Alive? Dan Bryson? You're lying, Billy Mason!"

"All the same, I see him with the own two lookin' eyes o' me."

"And you didn't—you left him still alive?"

Mason cast a swift glance around them as Mack lowered his tones to utter that significant question. If other ears should catch such dangerous hints—but they were alone.

"I was heap glad to git off 'thout hevin' no more holes punched in the hide o' me," he mumbled, with a wry grimace. "As it was, I hed to nigh split my straddle scratchin' gravel fer kiver."

"What do you mean by that? Not that he—Bryson couldn't harm you, you fool!"

"What's the matter with the two critters as was in the shack 'long o' him doin' of it? Didn't I see one—the runty chap—make fer to pull a gun? An' wasn't he lookin' right my way? An' wasn't it plenty time fer Billy Mason to be beatin' tanbark ef he didn't want to hev his chips called in fer keeps? S-a-y?"

Terry Mack dropped down on a convenient stone, shaken more severely than he cared to have that foxy old fellow take note, although he believed he owned him, body, soul and breeches.

"Alive! Dan Bryson! And the two men with him, you say?" he asked, trying in vain to speak in his natural tones.

"Jest two men," nodded Billy Mason. "But ef ye was to ax me from now 'tel the cows come home fer milkin', I'll never tell ye tha'r names nur what tha'r nash'nality. I jest know that I've see'd 'em both in town inside a week past."

"Alive! Then our cake's all dough! He'll tell the whole truth, and Jonah Sparrow'll cheat the rope! Curse the hand that cut the rope when it was doing its work so gloriously!"

Billy Mason did not seem to exactly approve of this bold talk, and was moving quietly away when Terry Mack noticed his actions, and checked him with:

"Have you let on to any one else about this, old fellow?"

"Never a let, boss."

"Then keep your lips buttoned until I give you leave to open up," at the same time tossing him a couple of dollars.

"Wish I hed as many o' them as I'll keep shot!" grinned the fellow, his eyes glittering covetously as he snatched up the coins. "Reckon it'd be wu'th as much more ef I could happen fer to 'scribe the two men back thar so's you could place 'em boss!"

"Do that, and we'll call it a five, for luck," said Mack, checking his eagerness as much as possible, balancing a gold-coin on the tip of a finger as he held out his hand for the silver in exchange.

Billy Mason fairly jumped at the chance, and in five minutes more Terry Mack was in possession of the information he desired, while the bummer was hurrying off to break his coin at the handiest bar.

By this time the sun was setting, and though he had eaten nothing since an early breakfast, Terry Mack showed no particular baste in seeking his lodging-place.

His thoughts were ugly ones, judging from his

countenance, and they seemed to grow worse instead of better as the time passed along. But at length he started to his feet, muttering to himself:

"It's got to be done, and I've got to do it! I've had enough of trusting to other hands, for once. I'm coming, Mat Singrey—bringing you news that'll turn you mighty sick at the stomach, too!"

Using his eyes keenly, he had not more than gained the heart of the little town before he recognized a friend, and from him he learned where Matthew Singrey had been taken to have his hurts looked to. And before a much longer space had passed by, he was entering the chamber assigned to Singrey, at the Nugget House.

The miner was lying on the bed, partly dressed, looking pale and worn, probably quite as much from anxious suspense as through the loss of blood from his wounds, though that must have been considerable.

"What's the word?" he asked, eagerly, as he recognized his visitor. "Everything's gone right? They've done the job?"

"Almost as neatly as you did—and nothing better," coolly replied Terry Mack, taking a seat on the edge of the bed, near its foot.

"But I—what do you mean, man?"

"What do I mean?" his pent up passions breaking down the barriers and his face fairly convulsed with rage and chagrin. "That you played the fool! That Dave Hudson played the traitor! Curse you both, double times over!"

Mat Singrey looked frightened at this fierce outburst, and one hand slid under his pillow, to clutch the pistol he had placed there.

Terry Mack noted his action, and it served to bring back something of his usual coolness. Forcing a laugh, he spoke in a more quiet tone:

"Take it back, pardner, but—of all crooked days, this has turned out the worst I ever saw!"

"But—I don't understand! What do you curse me for?"

"I said I'd take it all back, didn't I?" with a cold, disagreeable smile. "If I really wanted to curse you, would I take the trouble to come all the way up here just to save your neck?"

Once more Mat Singrey shrunk away from those glowing eyes, and once more his right hand sought consolation and support from his hidden revolver.

"For that's just about what it sums up, pardner," with a curt nod. "You made a wretched botch of your work, and Dan Bryson is alive."

"No—you lie!" gasped the wretch, ghastly pale. "You're just lying to scare me into drop it, curse you!"

"Dan Bryson is still living, and the chances are that he'll get over all the hurts you gave him last night," persisted Terry Mack, with cold deliberation, his face so plainly speaking that even the shivering wretch lying before him could no longer doubt the perfect truth of all he said.

"Kill him!" he gasped, his teeth chattering like castanets. "Go kill him! Don't let him speak, or he'll—kill him, dear pard!"

Terry Mack shrugged his broad shoulders before replying:

"I'd like to, but the fact is Dan's dropped into hands too mighty powerful for me to pull against them—worse luck!"

"Alive—I can't believe it! He was stone dead long before I left him!"

"He should have been, I admit, but was not. And now—well, you saw and heard something of that fellow who calls himself Silver-tongued Sid, selling Magic Salve?"

"Curse him! I'm thinking of— You must kill him, Mack!"

"That is your part of the contract. You've got your pay hidden away for carrying it out. You made a miserable botch of it—fool!" his rage getting the upper hand once more. "Do you know that Silver-tongued Sid is an infernal detective in disguise? Do you know what it means when I say two of his men are now keeping watch and ward over Dan Bryson, nursing him up so that he can tell the whole truth?"

"He mustn't—it'd be the rope for us all!"

"You richly deserve to pull hemp for not making dead sure before letting the fellow out of your sight."

"And you—how much better off will you be?" panted Singrey, driven to desperation. "Who tempted me? Who egged me on until I agreed to strike the blow? Who—but you!"

"You can hardly prove all that, pardner," with a short laugh. "Who will you call to back up your word? Where will you find any such contract? I flatly deny even dreaming of such a wicked deed!"

"I'll tell all—I'll have you hang with me, unless you—"

"But I'm just going to, you idiot!" harshly grated Terry Mack, suddenly throwing himself upon the wounded man, clutching his throat so tightly that he was able to make but a faint sound, at the same time bearing down so heavily that the fellow could not grasp his pistol.

Under the most favorable circumstances Mat Singrey would hardly have been a match for the muscular foreman, but now, weakened from his injuries, and taken so completely by surprise, the red-headed ruffian gained a comparatively easy victory.

Maintaining his grip upon Singrey's throat

until he felt assured it was beyond his power to raise an alarm sufficiently loud to call investigation from the lower story, Terry Mack freed one hand to draw a substantial gag, and sundry strong thongs from his pocket. Using these, he rapidly but thoroughly put his intended victim under complete subjection.

This done, he tried the door, which he locked, then passed to the one window, which opened on the open space at the rear of the hotel. A keen glance on the outside showed him nothing to cause him uneasiness, and though he knew that only by climbing up the side of the building itself could any spy gain a view through that window, he let fall the green shade.

Tiptoeing back to the bedside, Terry Mack stood gazing into that livid face for a few moments, a cold, cruel smile causing his red beard to bristle about his jaws.

"So, pardner, you would swear to all the town that somebody tempted you to down honest Dan Bryson? For the sake of having company at your last fandango beneath the Rogue Apple-tree, you'd falsely swear away the life of a pardner who has vowed by all men hold holy to save your neck from the rope?"

As he listened to these words, Singrey caught at the dim ray of hope thus presented, though his being bound and gagged ought to have shown him how little mercy he had to hope for at the hands of this ruffian. He tried to make his eyes speak what his tongue could not manage, and Terry Mack smiled grimly as he read them.

"Take it all back, don't you? Wouldn't harm a hair of my loved head, for untold gold, eh? Well, Matty, I'll do what I hurried here to accomplish, just as soon as I learned that Bryson was still alive; and that is save you from ever pulling hemp on his account."

During their brief struggle the revolver which Singrey had hidden under his pillow, had become pushed toward the back side of the bed. Terry Mack leaned across his prisoner and picked up the weapon.

"You never would listen to reason, Matty, when the lads begged you to show ordinary sense and get a gun that fitted a man," he said, as he coolly inspected the weapon, lifting the hammer and turning the cylinder before looking into it to make sure the weapon was loaded. "You would stick to it that a 32 in the hands of a man who knew how to use it, was just as good and sure as a 44 or a 45."

"That you were wrong, the fact of Dan Bryson's living through all your shooting ought to be proof enough, and yet—I'm rather glad you proved so obstinate, as matters pan out just now, Matty."

He sat on the edge of the bed, playing with the revolver, his face calm and emotionless, though his eyes were filled with a peculiar light from which Singrey tried to shrink as often as their gaze met.

"I'll tell you why, after a bit. First: those devils of detectives will twist the whole truth out of Bryson, and then be looking for you with the nippers. And then, too, when the town learned how you played them dirt, the old gang that made it so hot for Jonah Sparrow will just get up and bowl—howl for blood! And so—

"Taking everything into consideration, Singrey, it'd be money in your pocket if all hands were to find you dead when they come after you. And so—you carry the only 32 in all Capital City. And so—with the baby gun in your fist, and the little pellet in your brain, who's to say you didn't commit suicide through fear of being lynched, when I brought you news of Bryson's recovery?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOW TERRY SAVED MAT'S NECK.

ROGER GLYNN was the only one present who felt completely satisfied with the result of that marvelous drug, while Silver-tongued Sid clearly was the one least content.

He had been so confident that when the whole truth of that midnight tragedy came to light one or more of his "big game" would be seriously implicated, that it was no easy task to relinquish that theory, even after the positive declaration made by Daniel Bryson.

"Don't try him any more, sir, unless you wish to seriously endanger what little chance he has of rallying from the double shock," gravely warned Timothy Timberlake. "There's Singrey; you may be able to scare the whole truth out of him."

Already the effects of that potent drug were beginning to pass away, and seeing that nothing more could be learned from Bryson, Grip-sack Sid yielded to the hot impatience of Roger Glynn, and consented to set out at once for town, to spread the joyous tidings which were to lift the shadow of the rope from over the head of an innocent man.

"And to think, we owe it all to you!" the young miner said, tears of joy and gratitude in his eyes as he caught and wrung the hand of the Grip-sack Sharp.

"Say to the Master Workman of the Universe, brother," gravely replied the other, his face lightened up with more than pride. "It was His ruling, or our efforts could have availed nothing."

"To you and your noble friends, after Him,

then," persisted Glynn. "Some day I may be able to show you just how intensely grateful I am, but now—I can only give you the grip."

"Never you fear but I'll make it count before the end," lightly laughed the grip-sack fakir. "For one thing, we'll all expect an invitation to the wedding. Then, I count on selling you a supply of Magic Salve—why, man, it's the grandest thing going to have in the family! With every gross goes half a dozen boxes—all nickel-plated and corrugated, expressly adapted for cutting the baby's teeth!"

"Now there's Dewey—the Magic Salve Dewey, you understand? He has been married seven times, and is bringing up seven distinct families of children, all on those boxes—on the profits of the Magic Salve, I mean, of course. And all of them cut their teeth on those same metallic envelopes. Which is why I'm so free to recommend them for that particular purpose."

Roger Glynn forced a laugh, feeling in duty bound to do so, though he was far too happy and excited to give thought to anything but his joyous mission of relief.

For very shame he forced himself to moderate his pace to suit that of his new-found friend. Had he been left to his own will, every yard of the intervening distance would have been covered in a run.

In a goodly measure Silver-tongued Sid sympathized with this eager haste, and they made rapid time on the trip to town. But as they drew near the outskirts, Harper forced Glynn to listen.

"We must set about in good order, pardner. Capital contains some mighty hot heads, and unless we take them from the right side, we may even yet see trouble. If they are not thoroughly convinced that our credentials are genuine, some of the toughs may make a rush to get even for their little disappointment over yonder by the Rogue Apple-tree. See?"

"Then you mean?"

"To find Cap Dawson, and learn where the prisoners were taken, as a first step. For the second, we want to find the city marshal—I believe there is such an institution?"

"Yes; Alfred Janeway."

"Good enough; it's likely that Dawson thought of him in placing our friends where they would run the least risk. Well, with those two to explain matters to the crowd, I reckon we'll have no further bother. And then, when all is smoothed over, you can be the first one to carry the glad news to your friends."

To the hot-blooded lover, this seemed a very roundabout method of acting, but his gratitude was far too deep for him to openly object, and by the time the twain were fairly inside Capital City, their course was fully laid out.

Fortune favored them in that, just coming out of the Nugget House, where he boarded, they sighted Cap Dawson himself.

Roger Glynn quickly blurted out the glorious tidings he bore, and though it required the confirming speech of Silver-tongued Sid before the veteran could believe what he heard, matters were soon set to rights, so far as the old soldier was concerned.

He seemed hardly less delighted than Roger himself, and hurriedly explained how rarely fortune was favoring them.

"I was just hunting after David Hudson," he cried, catching an arm of each man and hurrying them along, talking the while. "There's a sort of mass meeting being held right now, to decide whether or no we did right in granting Jonah Sparrow a reprieve even for a day. I feared the worst, and sent Janeway to try and hold the gang level while I looked up some recruits."

"The merciless devils!" cried Roger, hoarsely.

"Not all of them; remember that Singrey told a seemingly straight story, and the money-bags were found hidden in Sparrow's cabin. But with the paper you bring, we'll rout 'em, horse, foot and dragoons!"

Without further thought of David Hudson, Cap Dawson led them to the building in which the meeting was being held, and with Marshal Janeway to demand and help enforce order, Dawson read the statement signed by Daniel Bryson, clearing Jonah Sparrow and accusing Mat Singrey.

For a few moments after he finished, there was silence most profound, the citizens interchanging glances of triumph or of shame, according to the sides they had taken that eventful day. But when Dawson swung his hat high above his head, the crowd took the hint and almost lifted the roof with their enthusiastic cheers.

This was the wild tumult which sent a shudder of fear over Jonah Sparrow and his devoted daughter—this the alarm which David Hudson grasped at as an argument in favor of his suit. But before he could extort the oath he played for, the door was flung open and Marshal Janeway pushed Roger Glynn in ahead of Cap Dawson and Silver-tongued Sid.

Now that the longed-for chance was granted him, poor Roger could not avail himself of it. He caught Retta in his arms, and her convulsive sobs affected him sympathetically, and

Cap Dawson was the one to make known the contents of that valuable paper.

Never mind how it was received. Enough that, when the trio were left alone for a little time to regain their composure, three happier persons never met under the same roof.

Silver-tongued Sid stopped barely long enough to satisfy himself that there would be no trouble in setting the prisoner free, then he took Marshal Janeway by the arm and hurried him out of doors.

"We want to get Mat Singrey before any one else can get at him," he hastily explained. "If a friend forestalls us, he may give us a hot and long chase of it. If the gang—Well, we've seen enough of lynch-law for one Sunday!"

Janeway knew where Singrey had been taken, and at once led the way toward the Nugget House; but they were too late. For out of the hotel bar came Terry Mack, pale as a corpse, crying aloud that Matthew Singrey had blown his brains out!

"Hold him fast until you look into this," hastily whispered Silver-tongued Sid, almost pushing the marshal against the seemingly terrified foreman.

Janeway complied, for he had no particular love for the red-headed miner, and with a firm grip on his collar, Terry Mack was forced to lead the way back to the chamber of death.

For such indeed it proved.

On the humble bed lay all that remained of Matthew Singrey.

The fingers of his right hand were curled about the butt of a revolver. There was a ghastly hole in his temple, and the bedclothes were saturated with blood and spattered with brains.

There were no signs of violence outside of this. The gag and bonds which Terry Mack had applied were nowhere visible, and their use had left no traces behind.

Terry Mack told a simple, seemingly straightforward story. He said that he carried word to Singrey, who had once been his friend, that a rumor was being circulated that Daniel Bryson was still living. And before he could even suspect his purpose, much less prevent it, Singrey blew his brains out with his own revolver!

He had rushed at once to the office to tell the news, and was going after a doctor when Janeway checked him.

There was nothing to show that Terry Mack had aught more than this to do with the tragedy, and after promising to be on hand in case there was any further inquiry, he was permitted to go his way.

But he had kept his word: Matthew Singrey would never be hanged!

CHAPTER XXV.

AN EXCUSE FOR A ROW.

ONCE more Silver-tongued Sid felt that a malicious fate had cheated him out of a good thing, and once more he veiled his chagrin from all other eyes, making the best of what could not be helped.

He was morally certain that Terry Mack was not nearly so innocent of Matthew Singrey's death as he tried to make appear, but so far he could see no evidence to back his opinion, and lacking positive proof he hardly dared put himself forward as a minister of justice at that hour.

He only waited in the death-chamber long enough to satisfy himself that Terry Mack would be permitted to go free for the time being at least, then quietly left the hotel and hastened back to the place where Marshal Janeway had stowed Jonah Sparrow for safe-keeping pending his trial.

His absence had not lasted over long, but the interval was quite sufficient for the trio most interested in the full exposure of that atrocious plot to have in a measure regained their usual calmness, and to have decided that the air of the mountains was far preferable to that of Capital City.

"I'm going home," almost doggedly declared Jonah Sparrow, in answer to Cap Dawson's remonstrance. "What's the dark to us? What's a few miles tramping to—I'd go clean out o' my brain if I was to stop a minute longer here than I just had to!"

In his face, his voice, his trembling hands and limbs, the giant minet betrayed how terribly he had suffered since that dreadful charge had been made against him, and he had first caught the terrible roar of the angry mob.

Cap Dawson divined something of this, and yielded the point. He proposed to bear them company to the cabin, but again Jonah Sparrow objected.

"I know all we owe to you, sir, and some day I trust to show how mighty grateful we both are," he said, wringing the old soldier's hand with a vigor that caused him to flinch. "But now—the little girly wants to be alone, and so do I. Roger'll go 'long, but that's all."

And that composed the party which Grip-sack Sid saw setting forth on their night tramp beneath the twinkling stars. And another was watching them, too, though with far different emotions as his frowning eyes took note how tenderly Roger supported Retta; how confidingly Retta leaned on Roger's arm.

"Dollars to cents they'll marry each other inside of a week!" the Grip-sack Sharp said, confidentially, tapping the tall man on an arm, who turned swiftly with a black frown and clinched fist partly drawn back to strike.

David Hudson met a pair of steel-gray eyes and a smiling face that made almost a mockery of the words:

"Got a headache, ain't you, pardner? Let me sell you a box of Magic Salve, warranted to cure all and every—"

He left the glib sentence incomplete, for with a muttered curse, David Hudson turned and strode swiftly away through the night.

Grip-sack Sid followed after the Sparrows and Roger Glynn until he saw them safely beyond town; then, with a yawn that told of sleepless hours and growing fatigue, he retraced his steps toward the Nugget House, where he had a room engaged.

"My day's work is done, and I'm going to put in a sound night's sleep though the heavens fall!" he nodded, to himself. "If anybody wants to learn more about this miserable fizzie, let 'em tramp it out to the Bryson cabin and talk it over with Timothy. I'm a clam!"

No doubt Sidney Harper meant just what he said, but he was fated to have more work on hands before he could find the pillow he longed for, after all.

In order to gain his chamber, he had to pass through the bar, and he had scarcely crossed the threshold before several of the citizens gathered there, opened on him with eager questions concerning the miraculous resurrection of Daniel Bryson. As the shortest method of getting a chance to slip away, Silver-tongued Sid ordered a supply of drinks at the bar, but before the deacon came around to him, a rough-looking fellow sprung into the room, with a vicious oath that drew all eyes in that direction.

"Look out!" hastily whispered one of the party to Silver-tongued Sid in warning. "It's Punch Tinker, and he's after you!"

An instant later and there was no room left for doubt on that point, for with his gaze fastened on the grip-sack fakir, the athletic rough blurted out:

"Ketched ye, hev I? Found ye at last, eh? Now, double-durn ye all over, what'd ye mean by makin' a blamed fool out o' your betters?"

"Why didn't you bring them with you, so I could answer direct?" laughed Harper, but seemingly more as a jest than with any direct intention of offending the burly tough.

"I fetched it, an' that's heap plenty, critter!" scowled Punch Tinker, bringing up with a lurch that proved him very drunk indeed, or else an admirable actor, as he drew a little tin box from his pocket and shook it menacingly toward the smiling fakir. "Didn't ye sell me this box? Didn't ye warrant it dead sure fer to cure a drunk ef that drunk was older'n a week an' bigger'n a haystack? Didn't ye, s-a-y?"

Silver-tongued Sid gradually lost his bland smile as the big bully roared forth these sentences. He saw plainly enough that the rascal was itching for a row, and that this was only an excuse for getting it.

"You say I did?"

"Waal I jest do, an' I'm goin' fer to howl it so mighty loud that the hull o' Capital City kin drink it in 'ith tha'r ears sealed up too tight fer breathin' through!" viciously nodded the big fellow. "An' you don't dast fer to deny it, nuther!"

"Wouldn't be much use for me to try, then? Well, take a drink to taper off on, and call it even."

Both words and manner were placable, but they only served to render the big bully more insolent. He seemingly thought the victory more than half won, now that the fakir was "taking water."

"Durn you an' your drinks, in a heap! Ain't I bloody drunk a ready? Didn't I buy an' pay fer this yer box jest to git sober off'n it? An' didn't you guarantee that it'd cure me so quick it'd make the head o' me go in swimmin'? Didn't ye—s-a-y?"

"Did you follow directions, sir?"

"Straighter'n a bee-line!" was the prompt response. "An' 'stead o' its doin' as you said, the durned stuff hes made me fuller'n a tick! It's a humbug, an' you're a fraud—a durned, measly, travelin' fraud!"

These hard words created quite a sensation among those present, and there was a prompt drawing away from the twain as though to leave a clear field for what surely must follow. And all eyes were turned curiously upon the silver-tongued fakir, anticipating his actions.

His face was grave, almost anxious, they thought, and more than one lip curled with contempt as Grip-sack Sid took a coin from his pocket and held it out toward Punch Tinker, mildly saying:

"Of course, dear sir, if you're not satisfied with your investment, I'm bound to refund your money."

"Durn the money! What I want is—"

"Beg your pardon, sir, but I hadn't quite finished what I started to say," blandly interrupted Harper, a touch of his left hand unfastening his grip-sack and swinging it back upon the bar. "There's an exception to all rules,

and this is one of them. A rattlesnake may be warranted sure death, but it has no effect on a fat hog!"

A bow pointed his speech too perfectly for mistake, and a ripple of laughter ran through the men looking on. After all, this cool peddler of salve might not be such a craven, when the roll was called!

For a single breath Punch Tinker stood as though unable to fully appreciate that aphorism, but then, with a howling curse, he flung the little box with all his force at the head of his intended victim, then made a mad rush with clinched fists.

Silver-tongued Sid neatly dodged the first, and partially eluded the second, springing aside and being barely grazed by one of those huge fists, striking sharply in turn, leaving the print of his knuckles on the side of his assailant's face.

"Do you really mean it, big fellow?" cried Harper, springing back with the grace of a dancing-master, his hands on guard, a cool, tantalizing smile playing about his lips. "Speak quick, or I may hurt one who simply wishes to give me a fraternal embrace."

"I mean to mash you clean through the floor, durn ye!" viciously snarled Punch Tinker, furious at the laughter which rung out from the witnesses present. "I'll teach ye how to come swindlin' honest men!"

"Why not show the honest men first?" laughed Grip-sack Sid.

"I'll show 'em you—fit fer a blood-puddin'?" cried the big fellow, making another furious rush.

Silver-tongued Sid danced lightly backward, his face anywhere save in line with those furiously driving fists. Then—he ducked down, to rise again, inside the big fellow's guard, striking one-two in swift succession, the blows being backed by the weight of his body, each knuckle cutting through the skin.

The double stroke drove Punch Tinker back several paces, but he managed to regain his balance, contrary to the expectation of all who saw those blows.

Silver-tongued Sid did not follow up his advantage as he might, for though Tinker still had his hands up, he was too much shocked to keep a perfect guard, and a few more such blows would almost certainly have "knocked him out."

Others realized this, if he did not, and a chorus of murmurs told as much. But Grip-sack Sid only laughed in reply.

He was no lover of fighting at any time, though ever ready to protect himself. He hoped the big fellow would take the hint and profit by the punishment he had already received, though he began to suspect that there was something lying back of this seemingly drunken assault.

He grew more certain of this when he saw how quickly Punch Tinker rallied from the stunning effects of those blows. A man full of bad whisky would have been stupefied and rendered unsteady on his pins. Instead of that, the big fellow only seemed to be the better for them, after the first few moments, for they drove away his hot passion, leaving him cool and all the more dangerous.

"That's one fer you, critter!" with an ugly grin and a nod. "I'm comin' after mine, now!"

"I say, Johnny, who pays your wages for tonight?" asked Silver-tongued Sid, as he stood on guard.

"The grave-digger, durn ye, an' I'm goin' to hev the corpse ready ag'inst he is!" was the savage retort, as the big fellow once more advanced, his face a picture of brutal ferocity and determination.

"Very accommodating you are, Johnny," grimly nodded Grip-sack Sid, as he slowly gave ground, his perfect guard keeping the blows of his adversary from fairly connecting. "I'll have him write on your tombstone that the under-planted died of fool on the brain!"

Punch Tinker made no reply, in words, nor did Silver-tongued Sid say aught more. Both were busy—entirely too busy for wasting breath in idle speech.

Now that he had conquered his hot temper, Punch Tinker proved himself a dangerous antagonist, fairly well scienced, and remarkably active and light on his feet for such a big man. Only his superior activity kept Silver-tongued Sid from receiving marks such as would remain with him many a long day, and though he succeeded in getting in several blows, they lacked the punishing power shown by his earlier efforts.

Punch Tinker laid this to failing strength, instead of the necessity which Grip-sack Sid felt of keeping at long-arm range to save himself from a counter, and savagely pressed the attack, feeling that if he could once fairly close with his nimble antagonist, he would have matters all his own way.

Then, while on a retreat, Harper felt an alien foot trip him up, and with a howl of ferocious joy, Punch Tinker grappled with him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BILLY MASON RUINS A WINDOW.

KNOWING that he must surely fall, Silver-tongued Sid made no struggle to avert it, turning every effort to saving himself from being dis-

abled by having that heavy weight fall upon him.

He partly succeeded in this, the two men coming to the floor in a "dog-fall," with a force that fairly shook the building. And then, with an agile twist and writhe, he slipped out of that partly-broken clutch, regaining his feet, though he leaned against the bar for an instant, his brain whirling, his breath coming in gasps from the shock.

With savage oaths Punch Tinker scrambled to his feet and madly rushed at his eel-like antagonist.

"I'll mash ye clean through the floor!"

Once more Silver-tongued Sid retreated, but this time direct to the end of the room, pausing on guard where it would be impossible for anybody to pass behind him.

"Now I hev got ye!" snarled Punch Tinker, feeling assured of speedy victory since further retreat would be impossible.

Many others entertained the same opinion, but among them Grip-sack Sid must be counted out.

There was nothing like smiling in his features now. His face was very pale, but it was the pallor of fierce resolution. His eyes glowed as though backed by living fire, and his arms formed a guard so perfect and strong that the big fellow hammered away at it without making the slightest impression.

Twice he laid himself open, and twice Grip-sack Sid sent in a blow straight from the shoulder that cut to the bone and knocked the big fellow back a full pace. But as Punch Tinker as quickly recovered, the grip-sack fakir did not attempt to follow up his advantage.

Those two stinging cuts warned Tinker that he was not yet ready to be hailed the victor, and for a few moments he sparred more cautiously, confident that his immense strength would outlast his slighter antagonist, when all would be clear sailing.

There seemed good foundation for this belief. Grip-sack Sid grew less impregnable in his guard, and once or twice barely turned aside a savage thrust that might easily have ended the contest had it made full connection. And then—

The excited spectators caught their breath sharply, for after sending the big fellow back by another cutting stroke, Silver-tongued Sid dropped his guard a little, his eyes partly closing, his head drooping to one side as though he was on the point of swooning from pure exhaustion.

Punch Tinker was quick to see this, and instantly snapped at the cunning bait—for bait it proved to be!

He lunged forward, striking out with both hands—only to hit the wall as Grip-sack Sid ducked aside. Then—

Throwing his full weight into the blow, Harper struck with all his force and skill combined, straight for the point of the jaw.

And lifted fairly clear off his feet, plunging sideways, his head and shoulders striking the floor first, Punch Tinker fell, completely knocked out of time by that scientific stroke.

He never moved from where he settled. There was not even a tremor perceptible, and it is not to be wondered at that the awed spectators cried out that the fellow was killed!

Silver-tongued Sid paid not the slightest attention to those cries of mingled wonder and admiration, but singling out one of the company, who was yelling in a peculiar, cracked voice, he sprung forward and with the flat of his hand, struck him first on one cheek, then on the other, the last blow only saved from being a knock-down by the fellow bringing up against the bar.

"Hand for foot, you sneaking cur!"

"Hold on—I never—"

Spat! came another open-handed blow fairly across his lips, and with a howl of mingled pain and rage, Billy Mason jumped back, trying to draw a revolver from his belt.

It left the scabbard, but that was all Billy Mason had to do with it. Grip-sack Sid caught his wrist, giving it a wrench that flung the weapon over behind the bar and drew another scream of pain from the foxy rascal's lips.

"Don't—what hev I done fer to—help!" howled the bummer, as Grip-sack Sid caught him by one shoulder and the seat of his trowsers, running him across the bar-room toward the nearest window.

Then, with an exertion of strength that was little short of marvelous after the exertion he had been called upon to undergo during the past quarter of an hour, Silver-tongued Sid heaved Billy Mason clear of the floor, lifting him over his head and then hurling him bodily through the closed window.

With a wild shriek the bummer crashed through, taking sash and all along with him, falling heavily to the ground below. And with another agonized shriek, all was still without.

Sidney Harper wheeled quickly, a hand hidden in his bosom as his steel-gray eyes flashed hotly over those present. Some of them shrunk away, but not one showed the slightest indication of a desire to tackle the champion.

Satisfied of this, the Grip-sack Sharp forced a faint smile to his face as his hand came forth from his bosom, empty.

"Some of you doubtless saw the cowardly trick turned, gentlemen. To the others I'll simply say this much: Billy Mason chipped in when it wasn't his say, and by tripping me up, thought to help this overgrown brute out. I saw who it was that gave me the foot, but I hadn't time to say much, just then, though I made up my mind I'd have to read Billy a little lesson."

"And you just did!" cried the landlord, with a smile that deserved to be called a broad grin. "At the expense of my window, but—"

"Ask Billy to settle damages; if he refuses, add it to my bill," coolly bowed the Grip-sack Sharp, taking up the valise and snapping it once more in place at his left hip.

"That's all right, but— Hark!"

From below the demolished window there came the sound of truly pitiful moans and groans, and several of the company started toward the door, to investigate.

"Reckon Billy Mason has all the damages he'll be able to settle for!" laughed the landlord as, in company with Silver-tongued Sid, he made his way outside.

Such proved to be the case, in good earnest, on investigation.

If the bummer had sinned, so had he suffered. In his fall upon the hard ground outside the ruined window, he had broken both an arm and a leg. The shock had almost deprived him of his senses, though he groaned most dismally when the landlord ventured to learn the full extent of his injuries.

"He deserved punishment, but I never counted on breaking him all up like this," said Silver-tongued Sid, grave concern written on his face as the landlord made known the result of his injuries. "Some one hunt up a doctor, and you, landlord, give the poor devil a room and his keep. I'll stand shot, of course."

As it chanced, a physician came up just at the happy moment, and under his directions Billy Mason was at once carried up to a chamber on the second floor, where the doctor fell to work, having been assured that he would have no trouble in collecting his pay for services rendered.

With the majority of others, Silver-tongued Sid returned to the bar, calling for a drink. He poured into his glass barely enough to color the bottom of the glass, filling it up with clear water.

Leaning an elbow on the counter, he glanced deliberately around the room, taking in every face present, then deliberately said:

"Give these gentlemen all they want to drink, landlord—if their credit is good enough! As for me, I'd rather openly play the hog than pay for secret enemies!"

These cutting words created considerable of a sensation, but Grip-sack Sid coolly emptied his glass, wiping his lips with a silk handkerchief as he glanced toward Punch Tinker, who was leaning dizzily against the end wall, still stupid from that knock-out blow.

"I'm going to bed, landlord," the grip-sack fakir added, turning toward the side door leading to the flight of stairs. "If any person wishes to disturb me again to-night, please have them leave their last requests in your care, will you?"

This was a fresh phase of his nature, and few of those within ear-shot seemed to greatly relish it; but not one saw fit to utter an open objection, though the grip-sack fakir seemed to linger a little for that express purpose.

He turned when at the door, his old winning smile returning to his face as he blandly uttered:

"Good-night, gentlemen. Hope I'll be in a better humor in the morning!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE COUNCIL OF THREE.

THE lights burned late that night in David Hudson's house, and there were little signs of sleepiness to be read in either of the three faces on which the mellow glow of the shaded lamps shone.

One of those faces was beautiful. One was handsome, despite the dark frown that almost shaded it. The other had never been better than ordinary at its best, and now showed almost repulsive.

"If it was only fashionable to wear masks, Terry Mack, you'd be just about the luckiest member of my extensive acquaintance!" Queen Coraline was saying, with a low, musical laugh that served to turn the poisoned sting in its wound.

"Bite it off, Cora!" frowned David Hudson, with a warning flash of his dark eyes, tugging nervously at his full beard. "That isn't what we're here for, and Terry Mack—"

"I'd rather catch a jier than no notice at all," the red-headed foreman managed to utter, with a tolerable bow toward the laughing queen of cards.

The woman caught up a card that lay on the table, fanning herself with an exaggerated air of faintness.

Terry Mack flushed hotly at that, and with a curt nod toward David Hudson, he at once plunged into the subject which had led to his seeking that interview.

Something had already been said on that

point, but Terry thought best to make all sure, and so he gave a fair report of what Billy Mason had told him concerning Daniel Bryson and the men who had him in charge.

"I know the two rascals. I've had an eye on them for a week past. And now I know that they are simply working under that cursed fakir who bides his real business behind that Magic Salve business. The two fellows were helping him draw a crowd to the streets this very day."

"All of which proves—what?" asked Queen Coraline.

"Not much by itself, but when taken with all the rest—didn't the glib-tongued devil save Old Man Sparrow from the rope, even when it had begun to stretch his windpipe out a foot?"

"And Dave did nothing, then?"

Terry Mack flashed a more than doubtful glance toward the handsome gambler, his hands closing after an ugly fashion as he growled:

"He did too infernal much! I don't understand it, even yet!"

"Did you ever cipher out how much one and two makes, Terry Mack?" softly laughed the woman, the trace of malice in her really beautiful face growing stronger as she added: "It's simple as simple: a pretty face. Dave was always a fool on that particular point."

A faint glow came into the pale face of the tall gambler as he listened to this interchange of words, but otherwise he showed no signs of interest in the matter. It was as though he held himself back until those whom he had joined in council were ready to settle down to plain business.

Terry Mack must have read as much in that face, but he was not content to accept it as an answer. Though he knew he had no power to force a full explanation, or to punish treachery in this man without involving himself just as deeply, he was loth to quit the matter without having the mists at least partially cleared away.

"Of course you had your reasons, Hudson, for I know it's a common boast with you that you never make a blind move. Then—why not have tipped me the wink when you changed the plans agreed upon?"

Hudson could not well ignore such a pointed hint, but he answered it according to his own humor.

"I did change the plan, and I had good reasons for so doing."

"What reasons?"

"Reasons of my own. Or, if you prefer, take that just supplied by Cora. 'Tis a fair one, whatever else may be said about it."

Queen Coraline laughed softly at the feeble pun, and seeing that he might go further and fare still worse, Terry Mack concluded to rest content for the present with what satisfaction his curiosity had received.

"Well, may that fancy pan out to your liking. And yet—you didn't look overly well pleased when Runt Scrub walked off home with the girl!"

That was a barb of malice Terry Mack could not refrain from casting, though as he did so he drew back a bit like one who anticipates a return stroke. But David Hudson had on his thickest suit of skin that night, and showed no signs of being stung to the quick.

"Come back to your mutton, Terry, please," he said, coldly, biting the tip from a fresh cigar and striking a match as he added: "You were saying that this Silver-tongued Sid, as he calls himself, was simply making use of his Magic Salve trick as a cover—to what?"

"I believe he is a detective," slowly said Terry Mack, closely watching the effect of his words on the gambler. "I believe he has come to Capital City on a heap bigger game than selling salve. And if I'm right, you ought to give a pretty close guess as to just what that big game is, Hudson!"

That coldly handsome face turned just a thought paler—or was it simply imagination on Terry Mack's part? For the life of him the Forlorn Hope foreman could not fully decide.

Certainly those keen eyes were steady enough as they lifted from the now lighted cigar to his face. And there was no tremor perceptible in that clear, mellow voice when he spoke again.

"Just so that game has nothing in common with the Forlorn Hope, we need borrow no trouble, Terry."

"But it has!" flashed the other, losing what little self-control he had retained up to this point. "Can't you see it, man? Are you blind? Or—do you want to make me think you've thrown the job over, and me with it?"

"I never let go when my grip once closes. I never change a bet after once placing it. You ought to know that, Terry Mack."

"And never try off with the old love, until you're dead sure of the new—which makes three very valuable recipes, and never a red cent charged for the lot, Terry Mack," laughed Queen Coraline, a curious smile answering the puzzled look which the red-haired foreman gave her.

"Don't mind the queen, Mack," coldly frowned Hudson. "She's just a bit cranky to-night. She'll be all the sweeter to-morrow."

"For the right honey-bee, perhaps! Heigh-ho!" with a yawn that was only partially disguised by her beringed hand. "Wonder when he'll come buzzing by?"

Dave Hudson laughed a bit as he said:

"He'll meet more and longer stingers than he can bring with him, old lady, be sure! But this isn't business. Terry Mack?"

"You say it," sulkily growled the one addressed.

"You hinted at something about a row at the Nugget; what was it all about?"

"That infernal detective again—no less!"

"Slugged somebody? No need to ask if he got the worst of it, for that face of yours talks far too plainly for an old friend to mistake what lies back of it."

Terry Mack did not reply at once, for the whole subject had such a bitter taste in his mouth that he had to take it in installments.

"You know that Silver-tongued Sid, as he calls himself, helped you pull Jonah Sparrow out of the hole? Well, he had just come in from Dan Bryson's cabin. Billy Mason saw both him and Runt Scrub going out; Billy had been taking a sly look at what was going on in the cabin, you understand?"

"Since you say so—yes. But what has this to do with the row at the hotel?" a little sharply interjected Queen Coraline, her assumed sleepiness vanishing as if by magic while she was left in suspense as to how the grip-sack fakir had come out.

"Billy dodged them among the rocks until they passed by. He had been scared half to death while spying at the cabin, you understand, just a little bit before. And then he chanced to run across me, just on the edge of the town."

"Of course he told me all he had found out; I pay him, you understand. And then—well, I thought it best to give Mat Singrey the office, so he could make a run for it if he was strong enough."

"How very noble in you!" softly breathed Queen Coraline. "No doubt the poor devil fully appreciated the office you performed for him? Such true friendship is only too rare in these degenerate days!"

Terry Mack shifted uneasily in his chair. There was a light in those glorious eyes that both puzzled and alarmed him. How much did Queen Coraline suspect? For, of course, she could *know* nothing.

"What else could I do?" he muttered, his eyes drooping their lids before that intent gaze. "He was a pard. And then—well, when the pinch came, he might try to pull others down with him."

"Instead, he went up! How very fortunate for all the rest of us!"

"Bite it off, I say!" angrily growled Hudson, knowing that this was no time for an open rupture with the red-headed miner. "If you can neither listen quietly nor talk sensibly, better go to bed and let us settle matters in peace."

"I'm mum, dear—brother!" bowed the woman, sweetly.

Terry Mack seemed at a loss just where or how to pick up the broken thread, but a hint from Hudson set him right, and he added:

"You haven't forgotten what else that fellow done; how he brought the news that set old man Sparrow free. But maybe you don't know that he tried to make still more trouble for me. I saw him give Janeway the hint that led to my being—well, if not exactly arrested, next thing to it!"

"Just for warning your wounded pard? How cruel!" murmured Queen Coraline.

"Just for that! Of course they had to let me go. There was nothing against me. I only happened to be in the room when poor Mat blew out his brains with his own gun. But it cut me—cut me deep! And so I tried to play even once more."

"Not out of your own hand, though, Terry Mack," laughed Queen Coraline, as she keenly scanned his face. "I can only count the scratches Roger Glynn gave you this morning."

"You know Punch Tinker?" ignoring her taunt and addressing David Hudson. "Well, I saw him, and egged him on to lay the sport out."

"Dollars to cents that Punch failed, unless he struck from behind and out of snug cover!" impulsively cried the woman, her dark eyes all aglow as she cast aside her pretense of indifference.

"Don't mind her, pard," frowned Hudson. "She's been at the morphine-bottle again. What about Punch Tinker?"

"I tried to make him understand that he would have a mighty tough nut to crack, but he laughed at the idea. He swore the whole mining country couldn't bring out a man whom he was unable to lay out cold in one round. And so—he found Silver-tongued Sid at the Nugget, and went for him red-hot!"

"To come out stone-cold, for ducats!" flashed the woman, quickly.

"He did, for a fact," was the reluctant admission. "It looked a mighty soft snap, but Punch found it an awful hard one. The fellow knocked him out—broke his jaw, I'm told."

"Why didn't Punch give him a blue pill when he saw things were not coming his way?" frowned Hudson.

"Didn't have time. Thought all was over but shooting, when he caught it right where he

lived! And then—Billy Mason had tried to lend a hand, in a covert way, understand? And the sport just pitched him clean through the window, breaking him all to little bits!"

"Glory!" cried Queen Coraline, springing to her feet, her face lit up with undisguised admiration. "That's something like a man!"

"He'll be something like a corpse before another midnight!" grimly frowned Hudson, enraged by her evident defection.

"Down him fairly, and it's all right, but try to use foul play, either of you, and I'll avenge Sidney Harper, if so doing brings me to the foot of the gallows!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TWO OF A KIND.

QUEEN CORALINE faced the two schemers undauntedly, her face flushed, her glorious eyes flashing with stern resolution, her entire person the picture of defiant daring.

Terry Mack shrunk away with a curse rattling in his throat. David Hudson seemed about to spring up and use his tightly-clenched fists, but the woman never flinched a particle.

"There you've got it, my fine players! I'll help you in all the rest, but when it comes to playing dirt on a man—such a man as Sidney Harper has proved himself—count me on the other side!"

Without waiting for a reply of any sort, Queen Coraline turned and left the room, slamming the door behind her.

Terry Mack drew a long breath of relief, drawing a wicker-covered flask from his pocket and drinking heartily from it, after Hudson declined. Then he broke out with:

"What's got into the queen, anyway?"

"Too much morphine, for one thing."

"But—that wouldn't account for her flying off the handle just because—did she ever know Harper before he struck this town?"

Hudson gave a start, like one who had received a decidedly disagreeable shock, but he quickly rallied. Of course that was an absurd supposition.

"Never to my knowledge. Don't worry over it. She'll be all right after a night's sleep."

"But if not?"

"Well, what matter? Say she had a meaning in what she said; she's a woman, and struck by a fresh fancy."

"If I thought she really meant it!" scowled Terry Mack, looking quite the tragic lover, after a brutal fashion.

"She thinks she does, now, and it may be more than a fancy," slowly admitted the gambler, combing his long beard with his slender white fingers as he gazed through partly closed lids at his companion. "She and I agreed to play quits, to-day. When I hand over a few thousand—she named twenty-five, and I agreed to the figure—she is at liberty to go her way, just as I am to go mine."

"You didn't tell her that—"

"That she is part of your reward for helping me win the little Sparrow?" laughed Hudson, as Terry hesitated. "If I had, you'd have gotten something harder than mere words from her, be sure! Better give up the notion, Mack, for with her sudden fancy for this Harper, she'll never smile on your suit."

"I'll kill him—I'll cut his heart out and toss it at her feet!" flashed the miner, viciously.

"Take a bomb-proof along with you to hide behind when you do the tossing act, pardner," laughed Hudson, but suddenly growing sober again. "That's enough of fooling; business, Terry Mack!"

"It's as much to your interest as it is mine," growled the foreman, unable to leave that particular point, it seemed. "If that devil isn't wiped out—"

"What about the bonanza, Terry?" sharply interrupted Hudson. "You set Fritz Zimmer free, after Glynn and the girl trussed him up. Did you find the papers you wanted?"

"Not a paper," with a gloomy shake of his head. "I searched the cabin from end to end, and back again. They weren't in there, or I'd have brought them to light."

"You don't think—he couldn't have placed them on deposit, anywhere?"

"Either that, or else he had them hidden on his person. I rather inclined to the last, and started out to search his carcass. I would, too, only for you!"

He cast a look, half-appealing, half-threatening, at the gambler, but Hudson was not deeply affected by it.

"I searched him, while helping him to town," he said, coolly. "I felt in every pocket, and sounded every square inch of his duds. Nothing of the sort was hidden about his clothes, be sure of that."

"You searched him?" echoed Mack, in amazement. "With all the gang about you? You're joking, man!"

"Hide something on your person, and make a bet worth the trouble, and I'll agree to get hold of it without your knowledge before we say good-night," coolly nodded the tall gambler. "I never was a professional, because I could always make an easier and safer living by using my wits instead of my fingers; but I'm the best

amateur pickpocket you ever run across, if I do say it myself!"

And he actually looked proud of that fact!

"Then, of course, he must have put the papers on deposit, or else found a snug hiding-place outside."

"Somewhere about the mine, say."

"It may be so, and I'll bear that point in mind. Unless—curse it all, Dave Hudson!" bringing a tightly clinched fist down on the table between them with vicious emphasis. "Show your hand and let me know just what you mean to play for. What did you cut that rope for, when it was an understood thing that Old Man Sparrow was to hang?"

Hudson laughed, softly, a peculiar light coming into his eyes.

"To stand well in the sight of the girl, of course, Terry. Don't you jump clear to the other side of the fence, now. I'm playing to win, just as surely as ever, but I thought best to vary the order of dropping my cards."

"Better have stuck to the first line. What have you made by it? Nothing—worse than nothing!"

"Simply because others made a fizzle out of a sure thing," frowned the gambler, gnawing at his drooping mustache. "If Mat Singrey—may Satan stir up his mattress this night!—if he had made sure of Dan Bryson, all would have gone well! I'll have the credit of rescuing the old man, and then made sure of the girl by helping them away from an another mob, raised by my tools and paid for with my good money! As it is, the work is to be done all over again!"

"With more added to it," grimly nodded Terry Mack. "Don't forget that we've still another tough nut to dispose of, in this fakir."

"Of course," was the reply. "Let him rest for the moment. I'm studying his case in my mind, even while talking over the rest of it with you."

Terry Mack cautiously rose from his seat and tip-toed to the door, first bending an ear to the key-hole, then softly turning the knob and suddenly opening the barrier wide.

Hudson laughed mockingly as nothing came of this suspicious movement, and Terry Mack flushed visibly as he closed and locked the door before resuming his seat.

"Surely you didn't expect to catch Cora at the keyhole?" asked the gambler, showing only amusement at the fancy.

"Well, there's nothing like making sure," muttered Mack, then leaning across the table to add, in guarded tones: "What were you giving me a bit ago? About the queen I mean?"

"The solid truth," nodded Hudson, his face growing grave once more.

"You said you and she had played quits?"

"I said that we had agreed to break," was the amendment. "When I have handed her twenty-five thousand, the bargain is complete."

"Honest? You're not giving me empty guff?"

David Hudson met that eager yet suspicious gaze with steady eyes. He reached a hand across the table, and as Terry Mack grasped it, he spoke in low, earnest tones:

"I'll take any oath you see fit to dictate, Terry Mack, if you're afraid to trust the word of a partner. From this night on, Coraline and I are absolutely nothing to each other. She is free to take up with whom she fancies, and I'm the same."

"You name a big sum, but I'd never yield her up for ten times the amount!" huskily exclaimed the miner, his eyes all aglow.

As far as he was capable of feeling love—animal passion was the better term—Terry Mack loved Coraline Hudson, to give her the name she passed under to Capital City. And though he hoped to make a big stake out of the dangerous game he had begun, he valued his hopes of ultimately winning that peerless woman far higher.

"Look you, Terry Mack," continued Hudson, now unmistakably in earnest. "Swear that you will aid me in winning Retta Sparrow, and I'll do everything that lies in my power to carry your suit with Cora. Is it a bargain?"

"With the biggest jump I can make at it—yes!" was the eager response as their hands once more closed in a warm grip. "But can you manage it for me?"

"I'm dead sure of it!" was the prompt response.

"Good enough! And about Silver-tongued Sid?"

"Leave him to me, Terry. I've just thought of the very tool to cut his comb. Leave him to me, and go dream of Coraline!"

CHAPTER XXIX. AN INSULT CUT SHORT.

SILVER-TONGUED SID went to bed and slept soundly, peacefully as an infant, until a sharp rapping on his chamber door wakened him to the first rays of the morning sun.

In answer to his irritable yawn, the voice of Marshal Janeway penetrated the door, and though it was with positive reluctance, the Grip-sack Sharp left his bed for his clothes.

Cap Dawson was waiting for them both in the dining-room below, and after a hasty meal,

the trio, in company with a doctor and a couple of more prominent citizens, left town for the cabin until recently owned in common by Matthew Singrey and Daniel Bryson.

On arrival, they found the wounded man progressing favorably, having rallied from the dangerous strain put upon his powers the day before, far more rapidly than Timberlake had dared anticipate.

The doctor examined into his condition, then admitted that there was nothing more he could do. The patient was evidently in good hands, and backed by his wonderful constitution bade fair to completely recover from his injuries.

While they were waiting Bryson awoke, in his proper senses, and recognizing Marshal Janeway, asked eagerly after his treacherous partner. And when he was told that Mat Singrey had not escaped—no one dared tell him the truth while he was so weak—he begged that the rascal might be held until he could face him with his charges.

A few questions were all that were asked him, his answers proving beyond the possibility of a doubt that Matthew Singrey alone had been concerned in that outrage. Thus the last remaining shadow was cleared from the name of Jonah Sparrow, which was the prime motive of that early morning visit.

After a little outside discussion, it was determined that Timberlake should retain charge of the patient for that day and night, giving the doctor time to make necessary arrangements; then Timberlake was to be relieved for good.

Now that the silver-tongued fakir was afoot, he seemed indefatigable, and from the Bryson Claim he led the way across to the Sparrow cabin, accompanied by Janeway and Dawson.

They found all serene at the lone cabin, though only Retta and Roger were there to greet their coming. Grip-sack Sid looked just a bit surprised when he was told that Jonah, in company with his foreman, had gone to pay the Forlorn Hope a visit.

He said nothing at the moment, but before he took his departure he contrived to draw young Glynn aside far enough to give a hasty warning for the future.

"We can't prove anything against Terry Mack, but I believe he is a dangerous knave, and that he had a busy finger in the little pie we had served up yesterday. Keep an eye on him, and don't let the old gent spend too much time in his company without you are close at hand. And if Red-head tries to ring in whisky, spoil his game if you have to put a head on him bigger'n a flour barrel!"

Roger promised to do the best he could, but evidently he believed he would have no sinecure. Jonah Sparrow seemed to rely on the judgment of his foreman in many respects, and the young miner was naturally averse to do or say aught that could turn the anger of his sweetheart's father in his direction.

Pleading previous engagements as an excuse for declining Retta's blushing invitation to stay to dinner, the trio soon after took their departure for Capital City, pausing a bit at Rogue Apple-tree, to recall the exciting incidents of the day last past.

Cap Dawson spoke enthusiastically of David Hudson, and though there was a peculiar light in the eyes of the Magic Salve fakir, his glib tongue more than coincided with all the worthy veteran could say in praise of the Capital City sport.

On reaching the town, the little party divided, each going about his own business, though there was a tacit understanding that they were all to be at the last journey taken by Matthew Singrey.

Since the man was dead, it was pretty well agreed upon to bury his crimes with him, and though there were few rites performed over his lifeless clay, there were even fewer ill words spoken.

Not until after this burial was over, which brought it late in the afternoon, did Silver-tongued Sid pay a visit to the chamber in the Nugget House where Billy Mason lay, a groaning, helpless cripple.

That visit was a very brief one, but it served the purpose intended by the Grip-sack Sharp; it gave the patient something to think about, and prepared him for a more interesting visit when the proper time should arrive.

Through all that day Silver-tongued Sid saw nothing of either David Hudson or his "sister," Queen Coraline, though he kept his eyes well open at all times.

Once, at Janeway's invitation, he entered the "Free for All" Saloon, which was the title of the place run by David Hudson, but the handsome proprietor was nowhere visible, and when the marshal mentioned his name, the polite bartender knew nothing concerning his present whereabouts.

"No doubt he'll be on deck when time comes for opening," he added, with a graceful side-nod toward the dark maroon portiere veiling the wooden archway dividing the gambling-room from the saloon proper.

If nothing else, this would have reminded Silver-tongued Sid of his pledge to Queen Coraline, and he resolved to keep his word, even

though he knew it would be far more prudent to keep his distance instead.

He felt morally certain that Punch Tinker had not assaulted him purely of his own accord, while he knew enough of Billy Mason to be even more sure that the foxy rascal would never have played him that dangerous trick through simple sympathy for the big bully.

"Somebody is trying to down me for keeps," he grimly reflected as he looked over the contents of his magical grip-sack, in his own room at the Nugget House, after supper. "All right! The more they expose their hands, the quicker I'll get at the bottom facts. And if a man can't make his hands keep his head, then the sooner he finds it out and quits this business, the better he'll be off!"

With all his seeming recklessness, Sidney Harper took more precautions than showed on the surface, and though seeming so careless, no man living could be more keenly wide-awake than he was when he at length entered the Free for All that night.

The bar was fairly well filled, and as nearly every one present recognized the man who had so thoroughly "knocked out" the "boss" bruiser of Capital, Silver-tongued Sid had to run a gauntlet of proffered drinks with what tact he might bring to his aid.

"Just one, gentlemen!" he declared, with the winning smile he knew so well how to conjure up in times of need. "I'll divide it into as many portions as there are gentlemen present, if you like, but—I'm after the genial tiger this evening, and really, you know, I can't afford to throw away a chance."

"The Queen deals this evening!" laughed one of the sports.

"And sitting opposite her glorious eyes is enough to make any man go dead drunk, don't you see?" seriously declared Grip-sack Sid. "It costs a heap sight more, and lasts longer than a champagne drunk, but—who'd be without it?"

Many another sport present seemed to coincide with him in this, and Silver-tongued Sid did not have to advance any further reason for his abstemiousness.

Although the hour was still quite early, work began even earlier at the Free for All, and the faro tables were fairly well patronized when Sidney Harper lifted the maroon portiere and passed under the archway, pausing to take in the scene with a sweeping glance.

It was little different from all gambling rooms of that class and locality: a long room, plainly furnished, lighted by kerosene lamps arranged along the side walls, with several pairs depending from the ceiling, the former with tin reflectors, the latter with shades arranged so as to concentrate the light as much as possible on the different lay-outs for gambling.

At one of the two faro tables, a soldierly-looking man with iron-gray hair and heavy mustaches was dealing, and about this gathered the older, more professional players, leaving the younger, smarter, more impressionable "sports" to pay tribute to the other lay-out, over which Queen Coraline presided.

Richly dressed, her jewels sparkling brilliantly in the light, her beautiful face looking almost statuesque, the queen of cards was slowly dealing, pausing at each turn to pay out or rake down the stakes as the falling of the cards decided.

Silver-tongued Sid drew near this table, waiting until one of the players rose from his chair with a stifled curse as his last stake was swept into the bank, then he deftly slipped into the vacated place, bowing low as Queen Coraline flashed a bright smile across the board.

Neither spoke, for in a well-conducted place the etiquette of gambling is strict, and as no where else "money talks." A recklessly wagging tongue can work more mischief at a faro-table than almost anywhere else on earth; and if a number of thoroughbred gamblers are located at that particular table, the owner of that tongue will be pretty sure to reap the biggest portion of the crop, too.

Silver-tongued Sid quietly placed a little pile of money before him while waiting for the deal to end. Then he exchanged his bills for chips, placing a couple of bets as Queen Coraline slipped the shuffled deck into the silver box, exposing the dead, or soda card.

His wagers were never large, and his manner of playing was that of a man who wished to study the run of the cards before "plunging," but through it all his wits were never more fully upon the alert.

Believing as he did that his real character had been guessed at if not wholly recognized by the "big game" he came to Capital City in the hopes of bagging, he knew that at any moment a desperate attempt might be made upon his life.

And so, as it were, he sat with eyes in the back of his head, noting as by instinct each and every person who entered the room, while seemingly wholly absorbed in the fall of the cards before him.

The table was lined with players seated in chairs, and several others made their game by leaning across as they stood behind the more fortunate gamesters, placing their bets as fancy or judgment dictated.

Several times one of these "second row" play-

ers had leaned lightly on Silver-tongued Sid's shoulder, and a backward glance had showed him a perfect stranger; tall, gentlemanly, darkly handsome as to face, and one of the last persons whom a man would pick out as a scoundrel.

Yet, in the middle of a deal, when one of the bets placed by Grip-sack Sid proved a winner, and Queen Coraline placed beside it the sum called for, according to custom, a slender, dark-skinned hand quickly reached forward and appropriated the money-value, represented by chips.

"Gently, pardner," calmly said Harper, tapping the hand with a finger before it could be wholly withdrawn. "That happens to belong to my side of the board."

"Yes it does!" was the sharp retort. "In your mind!"

"I put the chips down; I'm able to take 'em up again without help, if you'll allow me to say so, stranger."

"And I say you are mistaken. I placed the bet, and the winnings belong to me," was the sharp answer.

"A question of judgment between you and me. Suppose we leave the decision to the lady dealer. Miss Hudson, please state which man that stake belongs to?"

"To you," was the instant reply. "I saw you place the bet, and—"

"You lie, you painted—" fiercely began the tall fellow, but his insulting sentence was never finished, for Silver-tongued Sid swiftly threw his head back as he sprung from his chair, his hard skull striking the fellow under the chin and staggering him badly.

Then, whirling about, Harper struck out viciously, knocking the man headlong half-way across the room.

CHAPTER XXX.

PISTOLS FOR TWO.

The instant he delivered his blow, Grip-sack Sid sprang aside, retreating until it would be impossible for any person to get behind him, drawing a revolver as he did so, for he believed that this was but another attempt to "down" him for good.

He was none too prompt in his actions, for the stake-thief proved himself a "tough nut" of the first water. That blow had seemed enough to keep any ordinary man on his back until assisted to his feet by sympathizing friends, but this fellow, with a cat-like activity, was on his feet almost as soon as down, his dark face fairly livid with rage.

"Steady, pardner!" came the clear voice of the Grip-sack Sharp in stern warning as his pistol rose to a level, covering his antagonist. "I'd hate to work a buttonhole, but if I have to!"

"And I say hold, Cash Peyton!" cried Queen Coraline, her hand rising from beneath the table, a pistol gripped in her white fingers. "Draw a weapon and down you go, for keeps!"

Instead of knife or pistol, Peyton drew a silk handkerchief from his pocket, gently dabbing it against his lips, cut by that backward butt, for Silver-tongued Sid's fist had drawn no blood, having fallen upon the other's throat. He forced a smile as his black eyes darted from one face to the other, and his voice was huskily soft as he said:

"Any others to chip in? Don't be bashful, I beg of you!"

"This is my pie, Miss Hudson," coldly said Grip-sack Sid, stepping forward until his body interposed between her weapon and the person of the man who had attempted to insult her across the table. "And as for you, sir, I reckon you'll find I'm amply able to keep your hands busy—too busy to make a living by stealing a gentleman's chips, anyway!"

"Steady, gentlemen," cried out a clear, stern voice, and David Hudson dashed the maroon curtains aside to stride swiftly forward, his white hand uplifted in warning. "What's all this racket about?"

He had no difficulty in picking out the ones most intimately interested, for, as is the custom, all others had hastily drawn aside to save their own precious skins, at the first inkling of a row.

"Cash Peyton insulted me, brother," coldly cried Queen Coraline, pointing out the prime offender. "This gentleman punished him for so doing, and—"

"What have you to say for yourself, Cassius Clay Peyton?" sternly demanded Hudson, laying a hand upon the accused man's arm and turning him about until their eyes could meet squarely.

"Nothing, save that I've been struck—struck by a check-stealing scoundrel. When I've wiped out that insult with his heart's blood I'll talk to you; not before!"

Hudson turned sharply toward Silver-tongued Sid, who was never more thoroughly on his guard, though he assumed a reckless air better befitting his pretended than his actual character, crying:

"Shake not thy gory locks at me, oh, mighty Mogul o' the flaming headlight! I was simply setting out of my chair to change my luck by turning around three times, when I accidentally happened to bump up against that swarthy soap-chewer. He took a tumble and now—wants to

eat me up just because he hadn't sense enough to get out of the way. Shoot such a critter anyhow!"

"You lie, curse—"

"That settles it, Mr. Peyton," coldly interrupted the Grip-sack Sharp, lowering and replacing his weapon, then quietly stepping forward until close before the fellow. "You lie. You tried to steal my chips. You insulted a lady when I asked you to abide by her decision. Now—down on your knees and beg both her and my pardon, or I'll lay you out cold!"

"You dare not meet me with the tools of a gentleman, sir!" cried Peyton, actually foaming at the mouth in his efforts to choke back his intense anger. "If you are not a coward—"

"You are the coward, Cash Peyton!" flashed Queen Coraline, her face pale as marble but her eyes flashing like fire. "You insulted me. A gentleman punished you for it, and I now thank him publicly for saving me from shooting a foul-mouthed cur!"

"Quiet, sister!" frowned Hudson, with uplifted hand. "This is my affair now. As your brother—I'll give you all the satisfaction you can get away with, Mr. Peyton. Name your tools and distance, sir!"

"After I've killed that dog, not before," coldly said Peyton, calming down as by magic, speaking low and evenly. "Only blood can wipe out the disgrace of a blow. And if he is too cowardly to meet me as a gentleman, then make way—for I'll meet him on his own level!"

Through all this the brain of the Grip-sack Sharp had been working busily. He felt almost certain that the racket was the outcome of a put-up job, though it had hardly panned out just as the schemers had pre-arranged it.

From top to toe this Peyton looked the typical fire-eater such as flourished south of Mason and Dixon's Line in ante-bellum days, and his manner of acting after receiving that knock-down blow but emphasized that point.

He was tall, sinewy, cat-like in his movements, and his marvelous quick recovery from a stroke such as would have stunned an ordinary man and laid him up for hours, if not days, proved plainly enough that he might easily hold his own in a personal encounter. That he made no such attempt, only went to prove him a man who depended on the pistol or cold steel to settle all difficulties in which he might become involved.

This was a far more dangerous antagonist than Punch Tinker, if only because of the deadly calmness which now marked his words and actions, and if a faint shiver crept over the frame of the Grip-sack Sharp, one can hardly fault him for that.

It told him that one or the other of them would hardly get through that night with life in his body, and though a bolder man never drew the breath of life than Sidney Harper, he showed no particular haste in accepting that fierce challenge.

He felt morally certain that despite his seeming anger, David Hudson was secretly backing this fire-eater. He was not so certain that Queen Coraline was also in the plot, though the chances were in favor of that assumption. As Hudson's sister, such a scheme could hardly be kept a complete secret from her.

How many other veiled enemies were about him, Silver-tongued Sid had no means of knowing, but he was positive that he stood alone, without a single being near whom he could depend upon as a friend. All now within that room were strangers to him.

David Hudson hesitated a bit at that coldly intense speech, his brows corrugated, his eyes roving from one face to the other, seemingly in doubt just what to say or how to act under the circumstances.

But then his face hardened and he almost repeated his former words:

"That lady is my sister, Cash Peyton. When you insult her, you insult me. Had I been present when those words passed your lips, I would have shot you down without warning, like a cur. Now—name your weapons, and I'll kill you even yet!"

"After that cowardly bruiser, sir," coldly repeated the fire-eater, gazing venomously into the face of the Grip-sack Sharp. "I'll kill him first. Then, if you still insist, I'll be happy to add you to the same list."

David Hudson turned impulsively to Silver-tongued Sid, holding out a hand which was promptly grasped without a show of repugnance or a shadow of the strong suspicions which lay hidden behind that mask. And in quick, half-imploring tones the tall gambler asked:

"Will you meet him, dear sir? If not—pity you didn't shoot him down on the spot!"

Silver-tongued Sid had made up his mind by this time, but he felt that he must get a little more even for those bitter epithets first.

"The fellow is a thief; he tried to steal a quantity of my chips. He is a blackguard, for he insulted a woman. He is a coward, for he made no attempt to return a blow dealt by a man. He is a murler, for he believes he is a far-and-away better pistol-shot than I am, in a regular duel; if he didn't, he sure he'd never be hunting such a fight!"

Through all this cold and cutting speech, Cassius Clay Peyton stood like a marble statue,

showing not the slightest trace of emotion. Through it all Silver-tongued Sid held himself ready to repel an attack in kind, but as none came, he added:

"To sum it all up, I'd be fully justified in declining any duel with a proven thief, scoundrel and cur. Only fools or open enemies could accuse me of cowardice. Am I not right in this, Mr. Hudson?"

"No doubt you are," was the slow reply. "But—"

"But as fools, knaves and enemies are plainly in the majority here to-night, I'll waive my rights. I'll cheat the whipping-post of its just dues, and give Cassius Clay Chip-lifter Peyton-Puppy the meeting he demands."

"I'll kill you for those foul words!" fiercely cried the Southerner.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SILVER-TONGUED SID MAKES A DOUBLE.

THERE was not a trace of color visible in his face as he uttered that sentence; cold and deadly in the extreme. But not one who heard him speak and saw the venomous glitter which filled his eyes, could mistake his position after that.

He meant to kill; he would kill, unless the grip-sack fakir was fortunate enough to get in a fatal shot first.

Satisfied that he had returned tit for tat, Silver-tongued Sid made no reply to that threat, his clear eyes busy noting what was taking place around him, and David Hudson was the one to first break the silence by saying:

"Since it must go that way, we will do this up in regulation order, gentlemen. Pick your second, Mr. Peyton, and we will get down to solid work as quickly as possible."

"One moment," interposed Queen Coraline, who had been hastily "closing" her bank, putting cards, chips and other paraphernalia out of harm's way for the time being. "Since my decision brought all this trouble about, it's no more than right I should bear a part in the settlement. So—Mr. Harper, I beg that you will permit me to act as your second in this proposed duel."

"Sister—Coraline!" ejaculated Hudson, seemingly dumfounded by that unexpected interference.

Sidney Harper was fully as much surprised, and an ugly suspicion gained strength as he glanced swiftly into those great dark eyes. He saw her rich color deepen, her eyes to droop, and at once jumped to the conclusion that she, too, was playing a part against him in this put-up job.

"Apply for the position of principal and your prayer will stand more chance of being granted, Miss Hudson," sneered Peyton, turning on his heel to glance deliberately over the ranks of those present as if in quest of some particular person.

That vicious insinuation helped convince Silver-tongued Sid that he had the Queen of Cards to guard against, with all the rest, but there was nothing but manly respect visible in his face or manner as he declined the generous offer.

"You are too kind, Queen Coraline, and it tears my heart wide open to even think of refusing an offer from your lips. But—you heard what Mr. Peyton said. He means business, and since nothing will satisfy his thirst but gore, you might run the risk of getting those dainty laces soiled. So—I reckon 'most any sort of a man will do for me."

"I thought it was understood that I was to act as your second, Mr. Harper," calmly said the gambler, "just as I would have begged you to see me through had that insolent scoundrel taken me at my offer to shift the quarrel to my own shoulders. Still, if you object—"

"Do you know of any particular reason why I should?" coolly asked Silver-tongued Sid, a half-mocking glitter in his gray eyes as they met those dark orbs. "All I ask is a fair shake, and if you were the blackest, most treacherous enemy the whole earth holds, you would not dare play me dirt while so many honest eyes were watching your every move."

"Thank you for your trust, my dear sir," bowed Hudson, showing not the slightest uneasiness in face or voice at that thinly veiled warning. "I accept, and will bitterly avenge your death should fate turn in favor of that foul-mouthed cur."

Silver-tongued Sid turned toward the faro table, but Queen Coraline had already left it, gliding silently away with bowed head. Had she taken offense at his rejection? Or were her movements but part of the dangerous plot which, more surely than ever, he felt was being carried out against him?

Carelessly leaning against the faro table with its green cover of oil-cloth, bearing a painted suit of cards, the Grip-sack Sharp waited the completion of the preliminaries, outwardly the calmest, most unconcerned of all there present.

It was but a surface calmness, however, for his brain was busy enough, and more than once he stilled an imprecation on his folly in taking such long chances when so much depended upon his being hand and foot free.

As hinted, he had come to Capital City on a still-hunt for big and dangerous game. He had

reason to feel fairly confident that he had not been mistaken in his belief, a though he had not yet drawn the toils quite as snugly about his game as he desired. Now—

"Will Mitchell and Timberlake prove equal to the emergency?" he asked himself while watching what was going on before him. "They mean well, and are true as steel, but they need a head to direct; they can follow true as the veriest bloodhounds; if they could only lead!"

From among the crowd gathered inside the room—and this was rapidly increasing as word spread after some marvelous fashion that something unique was on the tapis at the Free for All—Cash Peyton selected one Major Tomlinson, who promptly agreed to act as his second.

Drawing a little apart, yet in fair view of both the principals, in a space which David Hudson had authority enough to keep free from all intrusion, the two seconds quickly arranged matters, finally agreeing on all points, though each one naturally tried to jealously guard the best interests of his principal.

When all points were settled, Major Tomlinson, a pompous veteran of more than middle age, who had fought long and well on the losing side during the Civil War, came forward to explain the conditions under which the duel was to be fought, at each section asking the confirmation of his gentlemanly coadjutor.

"The terms agreed upon, sir, and you, Mr. Peyton," bowing elaborately to each in turn, "are simply as follows:

"The weapons are to be revolvers, since dueling pistols are not to be procured without too great a delay. Each gentleman is to be armed with a single revolver, when he has taken his position. The word will be given as usual: fire—one, two, three! The principals will be permitted to fire at will after the first shot, which must be delivered only *after* the word 'fire' is called out; before that, would be murder, and I, for one, would do my best to shoot the transgressor without further warning."

"The distance is to be thirty paces at the start, the place in the street just outside this building," curtly interposed David Hudson, frowning a bit at the tiresome proximity of his colleague. "I offered the use of this room, but—"

"I could not accept it," bowed Major Tomlinson, stiffly. "It would be detrimental to the establishment, and the open air is better. There is a full moon, and where men are in earnest—"

"They ask for a chance to prove that earnestness by something more stirring than idle talk!" flashed Peyton, frowningly.

"The gentleman is yearning for his little couch—two by six," laughed Silver-tongued Sid, also in nowise anxious to protract the inevitable. "We trust all the rest to our friends."

"I have only to add, sir, that each principal will be examined by his adversary's representative and deprived of all weapons before the building is left," stiffly bowed the major, showing how deeply his old-fashioned pride was hurt by such brusque proceedings.

Cash Peyton promptly stepped forward, holding up his hands where all could see they were empty, while David Hudson took a brace of revolvers and an ugly-looking knife from his person.

Silver-tongued Sid was only a little less prompt, and that brief delay was caused by his recognizing John Mitchell, who just then entered the hall. He removed his grip, giving it in charge of his friend, at the same time whispering a few hasty words which no other ear could catch.

"At your service, sir," he easily said, bowing to the major, who deliberately and conscientiously performed the duty assigned him.

As each man would naturally prefer to use his own weapon, one revolver was exchanged, the other weapons being placed behind the bar for safe-keeping. The seconds were to load the tools, only handing them to their principals when at the firing point.

When the terms were fully understood by all, there was a general stampede for out-doors, each man being eager to secure an advantageous as well as safe position from whence the duel might be viewed in all its glory. John Mitchell slung the grip-sack over his shoulder and was among the first to leave the building.

When the disarming was accomplished, and the party were moving out of the gambling hall, David Hudson took time to utter a little hurried advice.

"Peyton is a dead-shot, but he has to dwell on his aim for an instant. Of course I know nothing about your accomplishments in that direction, but even if you are not a natural snap-shot, you might throw him off his balance by firing one shot as soon after the word as possible, then bringing him down at your leisure."

"Thanks," bowed Silver-tongued Sid. "I'll bear your advice in mind, and do my level best to make it interesting for the gentleman."

Arm-in-arm Peyton and Tomlinson, Hudson and Harper, left the house, finding the street fairly lined by eager spectators. And one of them—it was John Mitchell, standing close beside the door—managed to touch the Grip-sack

Sharp, and utter a single word without Hudson's noting the one or the other.

Tomlinson led his principal up the street, halting him at the named distance from where Hudson took his stand. And though Silver-tongued Sid was on the keen watch for treachery, so far nothing suspicious met his eyes. The positions were fair, neither man having an undue share of light before or behind him, the full moon giving ample light for good marksmen.

Major Tomlinson had won the word, and standing a little apart from the line of fire, he flitted his white handkerchief, speaking out:

"Ready, gentlemen! In ten seconds I will begin to count!"

Coldly facing each other, the duelists waited for the word, each man sternly resolved to kill as the only alternative to being killed.

The delay was brief. Major Tomlinson cried out distinctly:

"Ready, gentlemen! Fire—one, two, three!"

He may have heard the numbers, but it is doubtful if any other pair of ears caught them distinctly, for hardly had the word fire left his lips when a double explosion rent the air.

A true snap-shot, never having to delay or lose an instant in taking aim, Silver-tongued Sid flung up his right arm and pulled trigger.

Peyton was a little slower, though he, too, seemed to be a "line shot" and fired almost instantly.

A sharp, angry cry rang out, and the Grip-sack Sharp dropped forward on his face!

To all seeming he had been shot through brain or heart, and cries of horror broke forth from the eager spectators as they began to surge forward, only to be warned back by both seconds.

"Back, you idiots!" cried Hudson, warningly. "Do you want to—"

"Back, or I'll shoot a road straight through you!" viciously yelled Peyton, springing forward to make his victory complete without loss of time. "Back, or I'll—"

That sentence was never completed in this world!

Silver-tongued Sid rose to his knees, his right hand extended part way, a stream of fire leaping forth as it seemed from his finger-tips.

And with a hoarse, gurgling cry Cassius Clay Peyton stopped short, the revolver dropping from his up-flung hand. He turned half-around, then fell face downward, like a log!

Silver-tongued Sid sprung to his feet the instant he fired his second shot. He never cast a glance toward his adversary, but with glowing eyes and face pale as that of a corpse, he strode up to where David Hudson was standing.

"You treacherous cur, *down you go!*" he cried, fiercely, striking with clubbed revolver.

The heavy weapon fell squarely on the head of the gambler, sending him to earth without cry or groan.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A DISTARDLY TRICK EXPOSED.

SILVER-TONGUED SID planted a foot on the body of the fallen gambler, both hands armed with weapons handed him by sturdy John Mitchell, who now stood back to back with his mate, also armed and defiant.

"Steady, gentlemen!" cried the Grip-sack Sharp. "Crowd us at your peril!"

"What has he done, that you—"

"Played as foul a trick as ever evil brain hatched up outside of Hales!" flashed the man of the grip, almost too angry to explain himself.

"And if I can't prove as much to your complete satisfaction, I'll agree to submit to the most degraded penalty you can devise!"

"I reckon I'll have to take charge here," sternly said Marshal Janeway, putting in an appearance, hardly half dressed, for he had been roused from an early bed with hints of a wholesale tragedy at the Free for All. "Who's in the wrong?"

"I ask no better referee than your own marshal, gentlemen," cried Harper, growing more cool as the moments went by. "And as the starting point—will Major Tomlinson look at this pistol and state whether or no it is the one he took from my person, then handed to Dave Hudson for reloading?"

A little shaken by the wholly unexpected death of his principal, the old soldier came forward. But he was cool enough to declare, after a thorough examination, that Harper was right: the weapon in question was the same which he had given Hudson to reload for the duel.

"Thank you, sir," bowed Harper, adding: "Take the gun, Marshal Janeway, and holding it where these gentlemen can see your movements, give its loading a careful inspection. I swear that David Hudson plotted with Cash Peyton to down me without risk to either! I swear that David Hudson loaded the weapon I was to use, *with blank cartridges!*"

Opening the weapon, Janeway quickly examined the cartridges it contained. One shell showed signs of having recently been fired. All the others were harmless, the bullets having been drawn and a close-fitting wad put in the open end to hold the powder in place.

He instantly declared as much, and Silver-tongued Sid spoke again:

"I was looking for a trap, for I knew Hudson had it in for me, but I never suspected such a

dastardly, and at the same time clumsy, trick. I knew on the instant that the cartridge I fired had no lead in it: the difference in the sound was enough for that. And so—well, a good friend of mine, who shall be nameless, warned me of treachery, and at the same time slipped a trusty derringer into my side pocket.

"I dropped, both to fool my enemies, and to get a chance to change tools. You know what followed. Peyton thought he had a sure thing, and by closing in—he got it!"

The last words came with a slow, distinct emphasis that caused more than one of those who heard him to shiver in their boots. Never before had they known so much deadly meaning crowded into such brief compass.

"What are you going to do, with Hudson?" asked Janeway, plainly puzzled just how to act, as he returned the empty pistol and useless cartridges to the Grip-sack Sharp. "Shall I run him in?"

"Not on my account," with a short, hard laugh as he removed his foot from that prostrate figure, through which a quiver was now beginning to betoken recovery from that heavy blow. "Let him go, bearing the brand of coward, knave and cur!

"Just one word more, gentlemen," sweeping his keen eyes over the deeply interested gathering. "I declare that this whole affair was a put-up job to down me. I declare that every one concerned in it plotted together to murder me like—"

A sharp, pained cry cut him short, and Coraline Hudson sprang forward from out the shadow, her jeweled hands stretched toward the stern speaker, her face pale as that of one already a corpse as she said:

"No—not me! I swear by all men hold holy that I had no part or lot in this wretched affair!"

"I back her up in that," nodded sturdy John Mitchell. "She met me outside, and warned me to look after you. She said you were in danger, and needed all your friends."

"You do not doubt him, Sidney Harper?" asked Queen Coraline, her voice trembling, her glorious eyes dimmed with tears that sparkled in the glow coming from the Free for All windows. "You will not think me so utterly vile as to join in such a wicked plot?"

"Of course not," said Silver-tongued Sid, with a profound bow. "You are a lady, therefore pure as ice and chaste as Diana!"

She shrank away with a sobbing breath, and without another glance toward her pale face, Grip-sack Sid dropped the "doctored" cartridges upon the heaving breast of the tall gambler, saying:

"Show him those when the treacherous cur regains his senses. Tell him that I have gone to my room, at the Nugget House. Say that if he is not fully satisfied to rest under the bough I have given him, that he can call at my address. If his grit holds him up that far, I'll take particular pains to fit him for a long sleep by the side of his quiet friend and partner, over yonder."

Turning to Major Tomlinson, he added, coldly:

"Are you satisfied, sir? Was all fair, on my part, or do you raise objections to my using a different weapon from the one I was so generously supplied with?"

"Sir, I honor you for it!" impulsively cried the old soldier, grasping the Grip-sack Sharp's hand and shaking it with both of his own. "I would have shot Peyton with my own hand if I had even suspected his being a party to such a dastardly trick! And if we both live until the dawn of another day, I shall call David Hudson to a strict account for dragging me into such a foul mess!"

"After me, if you please, major," coldly said Harper, freeing his hand. "Give Hudson a chance to pay me a visit, and then, if he fails to improve it, you are at liberty to treat him as you see fit."

"Your lightest wish must be my law, as part penalty for having the ill-fortune to be mixed up with such arrant rogues. I knew nothing of Peyton, beyond the fact of his claiming my native State as his birthplace. He gave that as a plea, and I unwisely yielded to his request.

"Now—you do me the simple justice to believe that I knew nothing whatever of their vile trickery?"

None who heard him speak and saw his face, just then, could even for an instant doubt the old soldier, and Silver-tongued Sid promptly admitted as much, adding:

"Give Hudson full run for one week, Major Tomlinson, and I'll call you a friend as well as a gentleman."

He turned to Marshal Janeway, who was examining the body of the dead duelist. The heavy bullet had struck him fairly between the eyes, and his death must have been almost instantaneous.

"If you can learn, through inquiry among these witnesses, marshal, that I was in the wrong, you know where to find me. I'm going to the hotel, and shall not leave my room again to-night, unless you come to arrest me."

"Rest easy on that score, pardner," was the frank reply. "From all I've seen and heard,

my putting you under arrest for this bit o' work, would lead to a lynching-bee for my especial benefit!"

A ringing cheer that helped emphasize this blunt statement, broke from those near enough to catch his words, and knowing that he had lost little by that night's work, Silver-tongued Sid turned away in the direction of the Nugget House.

John Mitchell followed after, to join his employer at the first convenient shadow, and Silver-tongued Sid spoke hurriedly:

"Disguise yourself if you think best, Johnny, but I want you to keep an eye on the movements of Dave Hudson. Follow him if he attempts to leave town, and take note of all to whom he may talk in secret."

The shadow nodded his understanding, and the pair separated, Grip-sack Sid at once resuming his walk to the Nugget House.

Instead of at once entering his own chamber, Harper paused for a few seconds before the door of that in which Billy Mason had been installed by his orders. He seemed in deep thought, but his indecision did not last very long, and turning the knob, he opened the door and stepped inside.

Billy Mason was awake, for his broken limbs were very painful and rendered slumber-wooming uncertain. There was a furtive, frightened look in his foxy eyes as the Grip-sack Sharp stood with folded arms gazing down upon him in grim silence.

"I'm grateful—mighty grateful, boss, fer all you're doin' fer a pore, mis'able critter," the crippled bummer mumbled, huskily.

"I wonder who'll pay for your bed and board and doctor-bill when I've left town?" slowly uttered Silver-tongued Sid.

"You ain't—they'd let me starve wuss then a dog!" groaned the helpless cripple, shivering with undisguised dread.

"Then, like a dog, why not bite the heels of those who beat you, and lick the hands of those who treat you white?" slowly asked Harper.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BILLY MASON BLOWS THE GAFF.

WHILE uttering those words, Silver-tongued Sid closely watched the face of the crippled bummer, and though he gave no signs of disappointment to the outward eye, there was an expression to that foxy face far from what he either expected or wished for.

"Of course, Billy, it's nothing to me," he said, with an admirably-counterfeited yawn as he turned toward the door. "After to-morrow night I'll be out of the wilderness, and no doubt some of your friends will chip in to keep you from really suffering. Good-night, Billy. Happy dreams be thine, old man!"

If so, they were waking ones, for Billy Mason never closed an eye during all the remainder of that seemingly endless spell of darkness.

He mumbled, he moaned, he cursed, he almost howled with an agony that was far from being confined to his body. And yet—he fancied that if he could only move that body with something like his old ease and carelessness—if he could only roll and toss and kick and tumble about in bed—it would cool his fevered brain and permit him to win a little rest, after which he might be able to decide that ugly problem so unexpectedly presented him by the silver-tongued fakir.

The doctor who attended him had taken scant pains to spare the feelings of his charity patient. In blunt terms he had warned Billy Mason that while his cure would take considerable time—far longer than it would bad he punished less bad whisky in his day—at the very best it would leave him but the wreck of his old-time self.

"If you are not a cripple, hobbling about on crutches, you can count yourself in a streak of mighty big luck!"

And now, if Silver-tongued Sid were to leave Capital City without making any provisions for him, what would become of him? Who would come to his rescue, paying his bills? Who of all those whom he had slavishly served in the days gone by?

"Nary one—double durn 'em all to blazes!" the miserable knave groaned as he rolled his head from side to side—the only portion of his person with which he could or dared to take liberties. "One an' all 'd jest grin an' say, You be durn! Ef ye cain't work, ye kin starve. An' the socner ye git that, the better us is likin' it!"

From midnight until dawn that struggle went on. And after day had broken, Billy Mason continued the fight, only keeping his ears on a painful strain for some sound or token from Silver-tongued Sid.

"Mebbe he meant that he'd be clean out o' the kentry when he said a'fter this right! Mebbe he 'lows fer to take the hearse this mornin'. An' ef he don't drap in fer to say howdy, what's comin' o' me?"

Billy Mason was a miserable sinner, beyond a doubt, but his sufferings through those terribly long hours were sufficient, one would think, to entitle him to goodly abatement when the final penalty must be paid. And, after all, his main crime just at present was his reluctance to betray those whom he had served along evil courses.

Billy Mason heard Silver-tongued Sid leave his chamber at an early hour, recognizing him by that mellow whistle, and in his dread lest the Grip-sack Sharp was intending to take the morning stage, the cripple huskily called aloud to him. But the whistle never ceased until it died out in descending the stairs.

Those next two or three hours were positive torture for Billy Mason. He heard the stage roll up, load and then rattle away over the flinty streets. And not a soul came near him. Already his very existence seemed forgotten, for no one seemed to think of his hunger.

He wondered if he had tasted his last meal under the roof of the Nugget House. And then he tried to guess how long it would be before the grim landlord would come to turn him out—to starve!

Even when the doctor came to pay his regular visit, poor Billy Mason got scant satisfaction, for when he ventured to ask after Sidney Harper, his query seemed to frighten the physician, and he hurriedly took his departure, muttering something about having the question settled without further delay.

After all this, imagine if you can what a blessed sense of relief came to the miserable wretch when, at almost noon, Silver-tongued Sid in person brought him up an appetizing meal, with a bowl of steaming hot coffee—that nectar of the wild West sojourner!

"Just by pure luck, Billy," lightly nodded Harper, as he placed the well-laden tray where Mason could reach it with his sound right arm. "Happened to discover that the people had clean forgotten all about you, and so set to skirmishing on your account. It isn't much, but maybe you'll fare still worse after I'm gone."

True to his foxy nature, now that he knew Silver-tongued Sid had not left town, Billy Mason suspected that this was all part of a trick to force a confession from his lips, and while eating and drinking, he tried to decide whether he had not better risk all and hold a still tongue between his teeth.

"You're a bigger fool than Thompson's colt—and he swam the river to get a drink of water—Billy, even to think of it," coolly said the Grip-sack Sharp, studying the cripple's face and seeming to read all that was going on below the surface, without the slightest difficulty.

"Good Lawd! I don't know—"

"Then I'll tell you, while you go ahead with your feed; no telling when you'll get such another chance! But as I said—you are wondering if I am idiot enough to waste good money paying your bills while all the time you are screening my worst enemies. You're wondering if you can't bluff me off still longer, by whining about your helplessness and contrition; by reminding me that you owe all this misery to my pitching you through the window downstairs.

"It won't wash, Billy Mason, and the sooner you make up your mind to that fact, the less likely you are to be turned out upon the mercy of your employers; and just what that will amount to, you ought to be able to make a pretty accurate guess."

"I don't know a blessed thing 'bout—"

"Tell me about the cursed things, Billy," curtly interrupted the Grip-sack Sharp. "That comes heap sight nearer the caliber of your employers. Still, bear in mind that there is no compulsion. You're not obliged to blow the gaff. You can keep your secrets, and I can avoid parting with my good simoleons."

He rose to his feet and was about to leave the chamber, when Billy Mason huskily begged him to pause.

"I'll tell—if I tell, how kin I know I won't be left to starve like a crippled dog?" he whined, anxiously.

"If you tell a straight story, and don't try to tangle it up out of pure devilishness, Billy, I'll bring the landlord and have him sign a contract to take good care of you until you are able to forage for yourself. In addition to this, I'll settle your doctor bill, and put a few stray dollars in your pocket as tobacco and whisky money.

"If you refuse to spit it out clean, I'll get the information elsewhere, and forget that such a rascally knave as Billy Mason ever drew the breath of life. And when I go, all supplies cease, bear in mind."

Even an old fox like Billy Mason could no longer doubt the perfect earnestness with which the Grip-sack Sharp was speaking, and without a parting pang for those whom he was deserting, the cripple decided to make a clean breast of all he knew.

"You've offered to treat me white. They hain't never a one come a-nigh me. An'—fu'st, boss," lowering his voice to a whisper as he added: "Make mighty sure they hain't nobody hidin' in the rooms on both sides o' us!"

More to quiet the shivering wretch than aught else, Silver-tongued Sid went on a tour of inspection, finding nothing to be dreadei, but securely locking both doors before returning to the injured bummer.

"The walls is thinner'n paper," mumbled Mason, uneasily. "I know, fer through one of 'em I see'd—"

"What did you see, Billy?"

"I see an' hearn sech a sight as made the

blood o' me feel jest like sour milk!" shivered the bummer, his face ghastly pale, his eyes glittering feverishly as he flashed a glance around that little room.

"You mean the suicide of Mat Singrey, of course?" gently spoke the grip-sack fakir, a faint smile playing about his lips.

Mason nodded assent, and then hastily asked:

"What did you want me to tell, boss? Who be I to talk about, fu'st off? Mebbe ef you was to ax the questions—"

"You'd know better how to shape me the lies, eh?" laughed Harper. "No, no, Billy! Cut loose and tell me just how much you know about this trick to get away with the Forlorn Hope. That will do for a starter."

There was a brief silence, during which the cripple seemed trying to gather his thoughts so as to present them clearly and in compact shape. Then he spoke:

"Terry Mack hatched it up, fu'st-off. He was foreman. Ole man Sparrow liked whisky better'n he did hard work, and they 'vied up the job on them lines; Terry to boss the mine, an' Jonah to boss the bottle.

"Then Terry bit on a new vein, all by himself, an' to keep it secret, he kicked up a row with the two han's, then kicked 'em both out. An' then—waal, then he tuck in Dave Hudson as pardner. An' Terry was to hev the heft o' the mine, an' Dave he was to ketch Ole Man Sparrow's leetle gal as his sheer, mainly."

"Don't forget to show where Mat Singrey comes in, Billy."

"Waal, Mat was to furnish a corpse which they all was to help sw'ar onto Ole Man Sparrow. Mat was to be paid with the dust which belonged to him an' his pardner. An' Terry was to hide the bags—one of 'em marked fer Dutchy, as ye saw—whar it'd prove Jonah must 'a' hed a finger in the pie. An' so—waal, that's nigh about all I kin tell ye, boss."

"Which is nothing more than I already knew," coldly retorted Silver-tongued Sid, a warning glitter in his eyes that caused the cripple to shiver and shrink away. "Nothing for nothing, Billy Mason. Come out with more important news, or the bargain's off for good and all!"

"Ef—ef I was to prove that mebbe—that Mat Singrey didn't do it all to him own self, boss?" huskily mumbled the bummer, pausing repeatedly to moisten his parched lips with the tip of his tongue.

"That would be better than nothing, surely!" nodded Harper, though his face betrayed neither surprise nor eagerness. "Provided you are measuring off straight goods, Billy. If I catch you in a cold lie, I cut you off without even a shilling to cross yourself with."

"I couldn't lie—'bout that!" shivered the bummer, uneasily. "I never knowed, on tel then, what a devil a seemin' man could make out o' himself!"

"Yet you kept straight on, helping Terry Mack to do his dirty work," coldly retorted Harper. "Don't try to come the penitent game too powerful strong, Billy. All I ask for is simple facts."

"I'm goin' to give 'em to ye, boss, an' ef ye ketch me in a lie you kin shet down onto me the quickest you like. I've been wantin' to blow the gaff ever sence I see Terry Mack butcher pore Mat Singrey, but I was too bad skeered to—too mighty bad skeered!"

"Then it wasn't a suicide?"

"That devil—Terry Mack made out it was, but I call it bloody murder an' a mighty heap wuss then that!" flashed Mason, now intensely earnest, having once broken the ice.

"Cut it short. Just give me the main facts."

Mason told how he suspected Terry Mack of meditating evil, and in his curiosity he managed to gain an adjoining chamber, seeing all that took place, through a crack in the thin wooden partition. And after detailing what has already been placed before the reader, he added:

"Terry Mack bent Singrey's fingers 'round the pistol butt, and put one o' his fingers inside the trigger-guard. He made Mat pull trigger. An' then, takin' off the ropes an' the gag, he run down-stairs to sw'ar that Mat blowed his own brains out!"

"I more than half-suspected as much!" said Harper, with a long breath of grim satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A WOMAN'S WOOING.

AT the same time he saw that telling this story had greatly exhausted the crippled bummer, and though there were still some points which he believed Billy Mason might help him clear up, Silver-tongued Sid resolved not to press them just then.

"You've earned your living for a week or so, at any rate, Billy," he said, rising to his feet and turning toward the door. "Take a rest, now, and I'll drop in again before long. You can tell me still more, and if I ain't quite a hog, I'm after the full worth of my money."

"You won't—none o' them devils kin run in onto me!" whined the bummer, giving way to his natural fears once more.

"If they try it, they'll run into irons and a rope, Billy," smilingly reassured the Grip-

sack Sharp, opening the door and leaving the room.

He had barely reached the head of the stairs, on the way to his own chamber, when he was startled by seeing a queenly figure, dressed in plain black, with face hidden beneath a thick veil, come swiftly up the narrow flight, speaking swiftly but in guarded tones as they came face to face.

"Mr. Harper, where is your room? I must speak with you—in privacy!"

"You do me too much honor, Miss Hudson," with a low bow. "Permit me to show you the way to the parlor, below stairs."

"Are you a coward? Are you so much afraid of me, Sidney Harper?"

"Say I'm afraid of myself, rather," half-laughed the man, easily yielding to the gloved hand that touched his breast to push him out of the way.

"Which chamber is yours? If you are a gentleman you will not force me to remain here, where any one coming up stairs must see and perhaps recognize me!" hurriedly spoke the veiled woman, brushing past him, only to turn with an impatient gesture of command.

"That would not be difficult. There is only one Queen Coraline in Capital City," bowed the Grip-sack Sharp, a half-mocking light in his gray eyes, though he seemed to yield meek obedience to that imperious demand, leading the way to his chamber, flinging open the door and signing for the woman to enter.

"With you, sir!" she said, catching his arm and so guarding against possible flight, though only her strong excitement would have justified such a suspicion.

Silver-tongued Sid left the door ajar, but Coraline closed and locked it, then tearing off bonnet and veil, flinging them on the bed as she faced her unwilling host, her eyes ablaze, her face white.

"If you come for a supply of Magic Salve, Miss Hudson, or wish medical advice, I'm sorry—"

"Stop!" with a swift gesture that fell just short of being a blow, so narrowly did her hand miss those smiling lips. "You see my face. I come to you without even the pretense of a mask or disguise. Why will you try to keep up this miserable farce?"

"I give it up!" sighed Silver-tongued Sid, shaking his head with a sorely perplexed air. "If you mean the Magic Salve, I can't afford to give it up until I strike something better. It makes me a living, and I can't draw a breath without that—not for long, at any rate."

"Bah!" with hot scorn in face and tone. "You are no miserable street fakir. You are not what you try to make others believe. You are a man—a bloodhound, maybe, but still a man!"

"If that's intended for a compliment, accept my thanks, Miss Hudson. But—really, don't you know? This bewildering condescension on your part completely overwhelms me!"

"It is madness on my part, but I can't help it!" and for an instant the woman bowed her head and covered her face with trembling hands.

"Shall I show you the shortest way out of the dilemma, Miss Hudson?" said Harper quietly. "No one has seen you so far except myself, and I can speedily convince that self it was all a dream."

The knob of the door rattled at his touch, and the woman swiftly uncovered her face, checking his motion before he could turn the key.

"Do you fancy I have taken a step like this without long and bitter reflection, Sidney Harper? No! I am here, and you must listen to what I have to offer in excuse. If you refuse—I will speak, even though a score of curious scandal-mongers be looking on and drinking in my words!"

"What is it you wish to say, Miss Hudson?" his face as grave as his voice as he dropped his hand from the lock. "For your own sake I beg that you will be as brief as possible."

"Is this the shape of your gratitude—bah!" interrupting herself with a short, hard, bitter laugh. "I'm worse than a fool to look for or speak of gratitude in connection with a man! All right! I'll do my duty, then—trust to luck!"

She paused, as though expecting him to speak. Instead, Silver-tongued Sid stood quietly waiting, his face as expressionless as a marble mask.

"Still suspicious? But that belongs to your trade, of course!" the woman cried, with a little laugh. "And that trade? You are a detective, here in Capital City for the express purpose of bringing to justice men who have committed a great crime. Do you deny this, Sidney Harper?"

"I never could find heart to contradict a lady," blandly bowed the grip-sack fakir.

"You would be lying were you to deny what I charge, so it's just as well you have politeness to hide behind. Now—I know you are an officer of the law. I know the crime you are investigating: the robbery of the Atchison Bank. And maybe—I say maybe—I could put you in the way of arresting the men who committed that robbery."

"It would be a good thing, no doubt, for of

course there must be a heavy reward offered for the apprehension of the authors of such a bold crime. Still, don't you see, I'd have to show some sort of authority for making such an arrest?"

"You have that authority! You dare not deny it!" flashed the woman, intensely irritated by that cool placidity. "But without my help you will fail most lamentably! You are following the wrong clew, and unless you accept my terms, any attempt on your part to close in on your prey will only cover you with shame and confusion!"

More surely than ever, Harper believed that Queen Coraline had come to him in hopes of throwing him off the right track, or to delay his actions until her confederates could make their escape good.

"And those terms?" he asked, quietly. "Of course they are not really intended for my acceptance, but just through curiosity I would really like to hear them put into plain words,"

"You shall—*your love!*"

Whatever else he may have expected, Silver-tongued Sid was not prepared for this bold admission. And for a brief space his strong face flushed hotly, his tongue stammered.

"I don't—are you mad, woman?"

"If I am, 'tis mad for love!" passionately murmured the Queen of Cards, coming a step nearer, her hands reaching out toward him. "Say that you do not hate me—say that you will look on me with pity, if not love, Sidney Harper! See—I am yielding all for you!"

"Even your—brother?"

"Even the man who has passed in Capital City as my brother, David Hudson—yes!" was the reckless reply. "What is he in comparison with you? Did he not try to murder you most foully, last night, after you had risked your precious life in defending me from a foul-mouthed insulter?"

"You talk as though you really meant it all, Miss Hudson," slowly uttered Harper, a faint smile coming back to his face.

"I do mean it—see!" and Queen Coraline sunk to her knees before the man, lifting her clasped hands, tears actually dimming the lurid light in her great eyes. "I love you! I will die without at least your pity! *With your love!*—it would kill me with pure bliss!"

Unmoved, for he only gave her credit for a bit of exaggerated acting, Silver-tongued Sid watched the woman until she paused, catching her breath with sharp gasp. Then he coolly said:

"If I refuse, you simply die. If I yield, I kill you. Of all evils choose the least, so—Miss Hudson, if you will get up and put on your bonnet, I'll take exquisite pleasure in showing you the way down-stairs and to the street."

One short, gasping sob, then Coraline Hudson rose to her feet. She was pale as a corpse, but her hands were steady as she put on the bonnet and veil, moving to the door as Harper turned the key and opened the way. But as he did this, John Mitchell came hastily forward, saying in quick, guarded tones:

"Dave Hudson has skipped the town with Terry Mack, boss!"

Silver-tongued Sid turned sharply and caught the woman by an arm.

"You are my prisoner, Catherine Lipscombe!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

TERRY MACK TURNS PENITENT.

GOOD-MORNING—all."

There was a brief break in that greeting, but hardly sufficient in itself to bring such a deep flush to the cheeks of two of the trio then seated at breakfast in the Sparrow cabin.

"Hello, Terry Mack!" bluntly cried Jonah Sparrow over a shoulder, while Retta silently bowed and Roger Glynn openly scowled.

"Don't disturb yourselves. I'll just file a claim on the doorstep and wait until you are through."

Jonah Sparrow turned abruptly around, staring at his foreman in perplexity. Terry Mack was not wont to speak in such mild, even meek tones, and there was something about his face that added to the puzzle.

"You haven't—there's nothing gone wrong at the Hope?"

"Not to my knowing, boss," with just the shadow of a smile on his serious countenance. "My news'll keep a bit longer. And, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather you wouldn't spoil your breakfast for me."

"Shall I set another chair, father?" asked Retta, rising.

"Not for me—thanks," hastily said Mack, shaking his head. "I had a bite coming along. And—I can wait."

The meal was proceeded with in silence, after that. The coming of this man had cast more or less of a shadow over all three, and with him squatting on the threshold, appetite seemed to flee out the back door.

Retta flushed and paled by turns, plainly showing her uneasiness. Roger made no bones of his strong dislike, and plainly showed his inclination to pick a quarrel with the red-headed foreman. Only Jonah Sparrow seemed inclined to tolerate the fellow, and with natural perversity to favor him the more others slighted him.

"What is it, Terry?" he said, as he pushed his chair back and turned to join his foreman. "You wanted to see me, I suppose?"

"Yes, and with you the young people," hesitated Mack, rising to his feet and taking a step inside the building, instead of beating a retreat as Sparrow had plainly expected.

It was the first time he had entered the cabin since that never-to-be-forgotten Sunday when Jonah Sparrow so narrowly escaped hanging for another's dastardly crime.

Retta instinctively stepped before her lover, and as he saw this, Terry Mack forced a smile, shaking his head slowly as he said:

"I didn't come to renew that old quarrel, Miss Retta. I've had time to do a mighty sight of thinking since Sunday, and part of it made me come here bright and early this morning. Now—I ask you all three to give me a patient hearing. I'll make it as short as I well can, but it'll be better for all hands to have everything thoroughly understood."

Roger Glynn looked as though he could make his part of the understanding very short, if not exactly sweet, but respect for the father of his sweetheart kept his tongue in bounds for the present.

"You're hiding something, Terry Mack!" cried Jonah Sparrow, uneasily. "I never knew you to look or to talk like this. So—out with it, be it good news or bad!"

"Seem a little odd, do I?" with a faint smile. "Well, you'll soon think that's natural enough, for the next ten minutes will probably decide my future, for good or evil."

"I give it up!" nodded Sparrow, resuming his seat, his face the battleground for many conflicting emotions. "Tell it your own way, but if you could manage to find a short cut through, I'd take it mighty kindly, Terry Mack."

"It's anything but an easy job to tackle," still with that curious, flickering smile showing itself on his freckled face. "The telling will surely make one of you red-hot, and may make all of you mad. Yet it's got to be told, so—out she comes!

"Almost from the first day we met, Retta Sparrow, I have loved you as only a man can love who wants a wife. Wait—and you, too, Mr. Glynn! I mean no insult, nor do I want to pick up a row."

"Let him tell his story if he thinks best, children," a little sternly interposed Jonah Sparrow. "It can't hurt either of you. Nor can it do you much good, I'm bound to give warning, Terry Mack."

"I haven't dared hope it would, and yet—that's a lie," with grim frankness. "I have hoped, and I do hope, even when common sense says that I'm worse than a fool for doing so. Still, I reckon it's human nature not to give up until one has to."

"But as I set out to say: I fell in love with Miss Retta, and began building mighty pretty air-castles over it all. And when, one day, I made an important discovery, I laughed back of my teeth and said I'd keep the glad secret until I could tell it directly to my promised bride."

Retta shrunk back at that title, and Roger doubled up his fists as though he longed to smite the lips that dared to even hint at such a thing. But Terry Mack only smiled faintly, lowering his eyes for a brief space like one shaping the words he was to utter next.

"You see, boss, I hoped stronger than ever, then, for I thought I could do something to bring me closer up to her level. And then—well, never mind; I'll ask pardon for what I did when the devil was hot inside o' m', and come down to hard-pan. Now—is there even the ghost of a hope left me, Jonah Sparrow?"

"Not that way," was the grave response. "Retta is to marry Roger Glynn inside of a month."

Terry Mack turned his head abruptly away, gazing silently out of the open door. He neither moved nor spoke for nearly a minute. Then, dashing a hand across his face, he turned about, looking at no one save Jonah Sparrow while he spoke in rapid sentences:

"I knew it couldn't pan out different, but I had to give myself that one ghost of a chance. I did; the ghost, even, has faded out. All right. Maybe I haven't deserved anything better. I know I've played in mighty hard luck of late, and this is only the cap-sheaf."

"I told you I made a discovery one day. You remember that side-drift, which I had abandoned after a few blasts? Well, I lied when I told you the indication had petered; for when I sealed up that drift from your sight, I covered over a new vein, ten times richer than anything else ever struck in the Forlorn Hope!"

Jonah Sparrow sprung to his feet with a cry of mingled delight, wonder and anger. Terry Mack forced a laugh, lifting a trembling hand as though to guard against a hasty blow from the giant.

"Of course I did wrong, but I meant it well enough. I thought I'd tell my—Miss Retta, when all was smooth sailing. Now, as that time can never come, I'm making what amends I know how."

"I'll show you all where that new vein is exposed, and then I'll ask for my discharge. I'm

not over-thin-skinned, but I can't stop here and see—when that wedding comes off. And you won't need an overseer then; Roger Glynn can fill my shoes easy enough."

"A new vein! Richer than— Terry Mack!" with sudden fire leaping into his momentarily dazed eyes, his huge fists clinched tightly: "I'll kill you by inches if you're lying to me now!"

"I wouldn't blame you a mite," nodded the foreman, grimly. "But, I'm through playing dirt on anybody. Not that I've caught religion," with a brief return of that flickering smile, "but I've lost all heart in my work around here. I'll show you my discovery, then bid you all good-by. I'm going back East."

Jonah Sparrow caught up his hat, eager to learn for certain that there was no mistake about this glorious news, but Roger Glynn touched an arm, hastily whispering:

"Remember the warning, Daddy Sparrow! If you go with him, I'm bound to go along too!"

If Terry Mack failed to catch those words, he was keen enough to divine their purport, and with a faint smile he quickly unbuckled his belt of arms, holding it out toward Roger Glynn, saying:

"You've always been a little prejudiced against me, Mr. Glynn, and I'll not say that it wasn't natural on your part. It seems hard for you to give me credit for acting white, so—will you carry these for me until I come back after them?"

"Don't be fools, both of you," roughly interposed Sparrow, forcing the foreman to replace his belt. "Roger is going with me, for if Mack throws up his position, Glynn must take it, and the sooner he learns just what is in sight, the better for us all."

"And I will go with the rest," quickly cried Retta, catching up hat and light shawl, joining arms with Roger as he left the cabin.

"All right—a regular family party it shall be, then," laughed the giant owner of the Forlorn Hope.

Terry Mack said nothing, his face hard-set, as was natural, perhaps, with that young couple walking before him, arm in arm.

The mine was reached without event worthy of note, but shortly after the entrance was effected, a swift and deadly assault was made, before which Sparrow and Roger went down, almost without a blow!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A TERRIBLE ALTERNATIVE.

It was night without, and within that gloomy den, where it was always night, rude lamps were burning redly, yet with sufficient distinctness to reveal faces and figures.

Jonah Sparrow and Roger Glynn were sitting on the rough floor, their backs propped up against the rough wall.

Strong bonds hampered their limbs, and over the face of the giant mine-owner a little rill of blood had dried.

To one side sat Retta Sparrow, her hands bound behind her back, her face showing signs of grief and bitter tears.

Near her stood Terry Mack, his freckled face glowing with brutish triumph as his red eyes watched the tall, athletic figure in front of the two bound men. This was David Hudson, his head bound up to cover the wound received when Silver-tongued Sid punished him for that dastardly trick, in front of the Free for All.

Knowing that Capital City would soon prove too hot for him, after that exposure, and feeling almost sure that the grip-sack fakir was a detective in disguise, trying to fasten proof of a bold bank robbery on him, David Hudson left town and hunted Terry Mack, to rush their bold plan to completion while time remained.

Terry Mack was only too ready, and together they devised that cunning trap, into which their prey walked almost blindly.

David Hudson, and several tools on whom he could implicitly rely, were lying in wait, and as soon as the game was fairly in the jaws of the trap, it was sprung. Sparrow and Glynn were beaten down, Retta was caught by Terry Mack, and the whole party was hurriedly transported to this secret den, where the whole plot was to be brought to a focus.

"You are both as good as dead," the Capital City sport was saying in cold, hard tones. "Though you had a stout friend for every hair on your heads, not one of them all could aid you out of this trap, or make a move that can in any ways keep us from winning the stakes we are playing for."

"The time for working under cover has gone by. From now on to the very end, I'm going to let you see my full hand. And unless you are bigger fools than I take you for, before I'm through you will realize how utterly helpless you both are to bicker or to foil me."

"First, we want the Forlorn Hope. That part of the stakes belongs to Terry Mack, for without his judgment the claim would hardly be worth working; you know that, well enough."

"And Terry Mack wants it ship-shape fashion, too, don't you disremember it!" grimly cut in that rascal for himself. "I want the papers recording the claim, and I want a regular bill of sale, all signed and witnessed, so that the devil

himself couldn't oust me, once I've taken full possession!"

"I'll see you in blazes first!" hoarsely cried the giant, making a desperate but futile effort to break his bonds.

"You'll be there ahead long enough to grow mighty tired waiting for that sight," viciously laughed the red-headed villain.

"That is Terry's share of the stakes," said Hudson, a slight tinge of color coming into his face as his eyes glanced toward the bound maiden as he added: "As for mine, it comes in less material but even more admirable shape. I love your fair daughter, Jonah Sparrow, and mean to make her my wife!"

"Never!" cried Roger Glynn, great drops of sweat starting out on his temples as he caught that faint, piteous moan from the lips of the cruelly tortured girl.

"So you say, and doubtless never it would be, if you had anything to say about the matter," coldly retorted the gambler. "Luckily for your neck, perhaps, the final decision will rest in the bands of Miss Sparrow."

"I'd curse her with my dying breath if she could stoop so low as even to think of yielding to your devilish will!" raged the giant, his face fairly purple from impotent fury.

David Hudson stood gazing into that face, his own showing hardly less powerful passions. Through them began to flicker a shadow of doubt, for this fierce resistance was more than he had counted upon.

He fancied that when Jonah Sparrow should find himself utterly helpless, in the hands of men who were able to carry out all the bitter threats they might make, only such threat would be necessary. Not for a moment would he believe that the big fellow could hold out so long as to call for actual torture.

So far he had not entertained a very high idea of the giant mine-owner's powers, either mental or physical. He looked on him as a common drunkard, with weak will and easily influenced mind.

Up to the hour of that attempted lynching, indeed, Hudson had seen comparatively little of the man. And the pitiful exhibition Jonah Sparrow made then, under the combined influence of liquor, drugs and bodily fear, had only strengthened the opinion he had first formed.

But now—he hardly knew what to think!

He turned abruptly away, passing over to where Retta Sparrow was leaning against the rock wall, and bending over he placed a hand beneath her chin, forcing her face upward so that their eyes could meet.

"You devil!" hoarsely cried Sparrow, making another even more desperate effort to break from his hampering bonds. "I'll murder you for that touch!"

"If you are even the shadow of a man, Dave Hudson, turn me loose and I'll kill you—naked hands against all your weapons!" raged poor Roger Glynn.

If he had been born stone deaf, the tall gambler could not have given them less notice, speaking quickly, earnestly to the maiden:

"You hate me now, Retta Sparrow, for treating you with such harshness. I can't blame you for that, but I swear that I'll more than make amends for all I'm obliged to make you suffer. I'll treat you so kindly, I'll love you so ardently, that all this will never be recalled by you save as some dim, unsubstantial dream."

"Pity—spare me—spare them—both!" moaned Retta, almost completely broken down.

Little wonder! She had been so happy, after a time of sore trial and bitter fear. She had been given to the man her heart adored, by a kind and loving parent. He had named the day on which those two were to be finally made one, and had promised to sell the Forlorn Hope and go with his children back to Roger's Eastern home. And—almost better than all the rest! Jonah Sparrow had solemnly vowed to never again touch a drop of the accursed poison which had so nearly brought him to a shameful death.

This—and now!

"It is for you to say whether or no they shall be spared, Retta, my love," quickly uttered David Hudson, his eyes glittering vividly. "Say that you will become my loved and honored wife, and—"

"I'll curse you eternally if you dare say that, Retta!" cried her father, harshly.

"He is only lying to you through all, dearest," added Roger Glynn. "Even if you should yield, he'd never dare turn us loose, for he knows we would hunt him off the face of the earth for all this!"

David Hudson drew back, his face white, his eyes fairly blazing as he lifted a crooked finger to his lips, sounding a shrill whistle.

"Hear we be, hoos!" cried John Walkinshaw, coming from out the darkness, followed by a couple of hardly less muscular villains. "What shell we do fu'st?"

"Clap a stopper on each of those jaws, will you?" harshly ordered the gambler, pointing toward the two bound men. "Don't hurt them more than you can help, but— Ha!"

John Walkinshaw sprung toward Jonah Sparrow, rudely grasping his hair and pushing his head back against the wall, then trying to

cram a roll of cloth between his jaws. Instead—those jaws closed like a trap on one of his fingers: one vicious effort, and the ruffian staggered back, shaking the drops of blood from his hand.

And with a harsh, defiant laugh, Jonah Sparrow spat out the finger, bitten off as clean as though cut with a knife!

Walkinshaw, rendered almost crazy by pain, jerked forth a revolver and would have avenged his injury by murder, only for the swift action of Hudson, who leaped forward and knocked up his hand.

"Back, Walking John!" he thundered, hurling the ruffian away. "I'll see that you have ample revenge, but it must come after my fashion."

"I told you you couldn't bring him to time with less!" laughed Terry Mack in grim triumph at his better judgment. "Try the hanging!"

David Hudson stepped close before the two captives, saying coldly:

"I've tried persuasion and arguments in vain: now I'll come down to hard-pan. Swear that you'll do just as we bid you, from start to finish, or I swear to you that you shall hang! And more than that, I swear that you each shall hang the other, while Retta Sparrow lies in my arms as a witness that you each commit murder and suicide at the same time!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TO BE HUNG BY A FRIEND.

NEITHER of the two prisoners flinched as David Hudson uttered those words, though they understood enough of them to feel that death was menacing. What matter just what shape that death should take?

As for poor Retta, she was only kept from falling by the rock wall against which she was leaning. Her eyes were closed, her head was drooping, and at first sight it seemed as though fear and pain had caused her to swoon.

"She's all right," coarsely growled Terry Mack, as his companion in crime started forward with a troubled light in his face. "It's only a possum trick. The girl can stand double what either of the men can, and then not half try!"

But Hudson thrust him aside, and reached the side of the girl whom he was torturing in order to win her for his wife. He saw her shiver, and that told him the red-headed foreman had been at least partly right.

"Miss Sparrow—Retta love!" he uttered, dropping to his knees at her side, one cold hand touching her further cheek as it gently forced the maiden to turn her face toward him. "You heard what I told your father?"

"Don't even listen to him, little girly!" hoarsely cried out Jonah Sparrow, his tongue still at liberty, thanks to the manner in which he had received John Walkinshaw.

"Yes, I heard, and I prayed that Heaven might send its lightnings to blast such an utterly merciless fiend as you thus proved yourself!" impulsively cried the maiden, her pale face flushing for the moment with strong indignation and stronger hatred.

"Glory!" cried Sparrow, laughing exultantly. "That's my true little woman. That's my my—"

David Hudson leaped to his feet with a vicious snarl, crossing the intervening space and burying his white fingers in that mane of hair, forcing the giant's head backward as he fiercely ordered his men to complete the task he had before given them to do.

Punch Tinker and John Walkinshaw obeyed, securely gagging the herculean mine-owner, while a couple of their felows did the same for Roger Glynn.

"Now you're getting down to hard-pan," chuckled Terry Mack, with a nod of grim approval. "There's only one way to deal with fellows of that caliber: knock 'em down as fast as they try to kick. Words don't do any good; all they can appreciate is action. And the sharper you act, the quicker they come to the rack."

David Hudson showed his white teeth a bit, but he was beginning to realize that, after all, Terry Mack knew more about such matters than he did. And though it did not come natural to him to let another take the lead over him, his pride was growing a little blunted of late.

"Give us a sample of your system, then," he growled, drawing aside where he could look on, and yet be near enough for prompt interference in case he should deem it necessary.

Terry Mack lost no time in closing with that permission, and with a few curt words he sent off the muscular ruffians to carry out the elaborate plans his evil brain had concocted.

He himself turned to where the two bound and gagged miners lay, and squatting down before them, he gave his venomous tongue full swing.

"I've got you both where I've wanted you for many a long day, and while the lads are preparing for your entertainment, I'll just argue the case a little with you. David gave you a hint, but I'll let you have the whole arrangement, so there can be no possible mistake made

on your side. If you hang, you'll do so with your own free will, and with all eyes wide open.

"You think it can't be done: for Roger Glynn to both hang Jonah Sparrow and commit suicide at the same time! Well, even that can be arranged for according to my little patent—you'll see it in a few moments—but Jonah Sparrow can hang Roger Glynn, and not half try!"

Just then Punch Tinker, his face wrapped up in bandages to cover the injuries given him by Silver-tongued Sid, came back, bearing a pair of iron wheels with covered top, such as are used over open-topped wells for the rope to run through by means of which water is drawn up in a bucket fastened to each end of a long rope.

Assisted by another rascal, Tinker quickly secured these wheels to a heavy beam that crossed the den overhead, placing them some eight or ten feet apart. A nod from Terry Mack told him the job was satisfactory, and the big bruiser again hurried off, followed by his mate.

"That's the beginning, gentlemen," laughed Terry Mack, following the gaze of his prisoners to the dimly-visible wheels above. "The rope is still lacking, and so are the buckets. The lads are rigging the rope, and I've promised to manage the rest. Do you begin to see?"

The helpless men gave a start of angry horror as they began to divine the awful truth, but when Terry Mack burst into his laugh of vicious exultation, they bravely fought down their emotions. They would give him as little to triumph over as lay in brave human nature.

Retta Sparrow uttered a half-choking cry of horror, but David Hudson caught her in his arms as she tried to gain her feet, saying:

"You can stop it all with a single word, darling! Swear that you will be my loving wife, and I'll set both your father and your—and Roger Glynn at liberty, letting them go whither sweet fancy may carry them."

The herculean miner caught these words, and though denied the freedom of his tongue, he shook his head almost fiercely toward his child.

David Hudson gave an ugly growl at this, and viciously cried:

"What's the use of gags, when you let that big devil keep the poor girl cowed by gestures, Terry Mack?"

With a swift movement the ruffian cut the thongs that held the gags in place, laughing coarsely as he fell back to say:

"Talking can't hurt, and may do good. He'll need his tongue when the rope begins to draw—if it goes that far without a surrender."

John Walkinshaw came in, bending beneath a long, heavy timber, dropping it with a clatter directly under the two wheels. Punch Tinker and his mate also returned, each bringing an empty box.

Terry Mack himself placed these in position, directing his men as they lifted the timber and placed it across the boxes beneath the two wheels. Then he drew back to the side of his captives while the ruffians were slipping a pliable, well-greased rope through the wheels, cutting it off at the proper length, then shaping a slip-noose in each end of the rope.

"Just as easy as falling off a log—don't you see?" venomously chuckled the rascal, rubbing his freckled hands together in high glee. "You will each be stood upright on that timber. Each will have a noose fitted snugly about the neck. Then—over goes the support, and up goes the lightest weight—to stay!"

"Mercy—spare them, and I'll—" began Retta, half-crazed by all she was forced to see and hear; but before she could say more, Jonah Sparrow sharply interposed:

"Stop, girl! Remember my curse!"

"It's all for show, darling!" cried Roger, bravely. "They'll never dare hang us, for that would be to ruin his evil hopes—with the papers safely stowed away, he could never claim and hold the mine!"

"Choke them off, can't you?" growled Hudson, pale with rage, but Terry laughed in reply:

"I'd rather let their tongues wag, pardner, and you'll soon see why; those very tongues will turn to our good, in the end!"

By this time the rope was furnished with a noose at each end, and the ruffians were looking to Terry for further instructions. A single gesture told them what to do, and pouncing upon the two bound miners, they bore them, struggling as desperately as was possible with all limbs securely hampered, to the timber, supported at each end by one of the boxes.

The job was by no means an easy one, but the rascals were plentifully supplied with muscle, and, encouraged by Mack, in the end they succeeded in standing both men on the timber and in passing the loops over their heads. After that no aid was required to keep those forms in an upright position, for to lose it meant speedy choking!

"You're on the scaffold, Jonah Sparrow, but it isn't too late, even yet," said Terry, his evil eyes all aglow. "Swear to all Hudson asked of you, or die the death of a dog!"

"Hang me—and lose all chance of winning the Hope!"

"Don't you think it, Jonah," with a cruel laugh. "You're the heaviest, and you'll choke Roger to death. Then—I'll weigh you in the

very same scales against your charming daughter!"

As the horror of this threat burst upon them with full force, the giant miner made an involuntary movement that precipitated the end.

The box nearest his feet gave way, and, as the timber toppled over, both men fell, the rope about their throats.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

GRIP-SACK SID'S CLEAN SWEEP.

A WILD shriek of mingled agony and terror burst from the lips of the maiden as she beheld this catastrophe, and then she sunk a lifeless weight in the arms of David Hudson.

Terry Mack gave vent to a startled curse—for he had not meant any such sudden ending as this to his crucial test of nerve; and as he saw Roger Glynn drawn swiftly up to almost touch the iron wheel with his head, at the fall of the giant, he sprung forward to lift Jonah Sparrow to his feet.

But, swift as were his movements, those of another were still more rapid.

Silver-tongued Sid leaped into the den, a bared blade flashing in the light as he cut the rope with a single sweep, at the same instant driving his hard fist between the eyes of the red-headed rascal with a shock that sent Terry turning end for end to the further wall.

"I want you, David Hudson, alias Amory Starr!" cried the Grip-sack Detective, turning toward the white-faced gambler without a second look at the lesser ruffian whom his good right hand had "put to sleep" so suddenly.

For a single breath the gambler had seemed petrified, unable to realize what that sudden irruption of armed men meant; but, at those stern words, he dropped the insensible maiden from his arm, whipping out a revolver and firing point-blank at the man who had so cunningly and persistently trailed him through all his crooks and turnings, to finally run him down in the moment of his fancied triumph.

All Silver-tongued Sid's activity and presence of mind could not have saved him then, but the action of another did what he could not: checked that death-dealing bullet before it reached his life!

"For you!—Now do you believe?" cried Queen Coraline, one white hand pressed tightly over her bosom, the red blood gushing through her fingers, her glorious eyes fixed on Sidney Harper's face.

He saw her spring between them, but the shot was fired before he could do aught: fired, to strike down the woman instead of the man!

And, forgetting his own peril, only seeing that glorious figure sinking to the blood-stained floor, Grip-sack Sid caught Queen Coraline in his arms, to break that fall.

Luckily for him, John Mitchell and Timothy Timberlake were close at hand, for David Hudson, with a snarling curse was about to take another and surer shot, when he was knocked down and ironed.

Silver-tongued Sid lowered his beautiful burden to the floor, glancing swiftly around, hand on weapon. But his aid was no longer needed.

Only that one shot had been fired, yet complete victory had been won, and not a single rascal had escaped from that net!

John Walkinshaw, with his maimed hand; Punch Tinker, with his bandaged head and broken jaw; their two mates, each of them with a nearly cracked skull; Terry Mack, his eyes rapidly closing and his wits still scattered by that knock-down blow; David Hudson, ghastly pale and shivering like a leaf—all with irons about their wrists and armed men standing guard over them.

Truly, a clean sweep for Silver-tongued Sid!

It was mainly owing to Timothy Timberlake that this swift victory was due, for though John Mitchell was thrown off the scent by the cunning maneuvers of the Capital City Sport, his slender, awkward-looking mate caught sight of the little party of captives being hurried off from the Forlorn Hope to the abandoned mine, by the schemers, and using his long legs to rare advantage, he reached the Nugget House only a few moments after Silver-tongued Sid placed Queen Coraline under arrest.

With a few hasty explanations he made known his important discovery, and preparations were at once begun to capture or punish the desperate schemers.

Queen Coraline reluctantly gained permission to accompany the rescuing party, by declaring that she knew the spot to which the captives had been taken, and could guide the party direct to a point from whence a complete surprise might be carried out.

It was no easy task to win Silver-tongued Sid over, for he still believed she was interested in the plot; but, on her solemnly swearing to fix the Atchison crime on David Hudson, or Amory Starr, to give the tall gambler his rightful title, he consented, though secretly instructing Timberlake to keep a watchful eye on her every step.

The Queen had no thought of treachery. She knew, now, that her wild, foolish dream of love in connection with Sidney Harper had forever vanished, but she wanted to prove her

earnestness, her complete innocence of any evil plottings against him or his.

The opportunity was offered her when she saw his life in peril, and, without an instant's hesitation she flung herself before him, to receive that otherwise fatal bullet in her own breast.

For though it could hardly have missed killing Sidney Harper, with that deadly aim, yet on examination of her wound, Timberlake gave it as his opinion that she would recover from the shot.

With David Hudson and Terry Mack in irons, followed by John Walkinshaw and Punch Tinker, the two unnamed ruffians bringing up the rear, the rope which had so nearly proved the death of honest Roger Glynn, joining the sextette in couples, Silver-tongued Sid began his triumphant march back to Capital City.

With Marshal Janeway and Cap Dawson as part of his escort, he knew there was no likelihood of trouble from the friends of either Hudson or Mack. And then, too, he did not mean to linger long in Capital City.

He had accomplished the task that brought him to the mining-town, and in a chartered stage he meant to leave for the East that same night, pausing by the way only long enough to change teams and procure food and drink.

But before he went, he saw that Queen Coraline would be well cared for, at the Nugget House. He left money enough to pay all charges, though as the "sister" to the owner of the Free for All, she would by no means be destitute. And then, after a parting interview with the Sparrows and Roger Glynn, he took his departure.

Not without a promise to return, if possible, in time to take part in the wedding which was to follow. For—

"Glynn has promised to lay in a stock of Magic Salve, and as I'm the sole and only agent for that truly marvelous save-all and cure-all in this section of the country, I've got to be on hand—got to, don't you see?"

He really meant to be, too; but, circumstances would not permit. He reached Atchison in safety with his prisoner, having left Terry Mack by the way, to answer to the charge of murdering Matthew Singrey, and in the end saw Amory Starr convicted of bank robbery; but the trial was protracted until after the wedding which changed Retta Sparrow into Mrs. Roger Glynn.

Not long afterward, though, Silver-tongued Sid arrived at Capital City, and with him came the representative of a company interested in mining property. The Forlorn Hope, its new vein developed sufficiently to give fair promise of turning out a veritable bonanza, was examined, an offer was made and at once accepted. And with wealth enough to insure them comfort for life, Jonah Sparrow and his "two children" turned their backs forever on the place where they had passed through such bitter trials, to settle down in an Eastern home.

From that day to this, Jonah Sparrow has steadily kept the pledge of "touch not, handle not," made to Retta after his narrow escape from the lynchers' rope.

And Silver-tongued Sid?

Still in harness, performing his dangerous work with the same cool disregard of danger shown so often before.

And if the Fates be propitious, we may meet him again.

THE END.

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